SYMBOLISM IN LEAVES OF GRASS

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SYMBOLISM IN LEAVES OF GRASS

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CHAPTER I

WHITMAN'S MYSTICISM

Critical writers have spent much time in tracing periods of growth and development in the works of great poets. This is not always easy, for periods of development sometimes merge and overlap, making the task difficult. But American literature, in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, presents a case where the line of demarcation is so plainly drawn that it startles and confounds the critics. When we compare the poet's early poetry with that written after 1855, it seems as if two men of most inharmonious minds had dwelt in the same frame. From this comparison we find that the poetry of his first period was "poor in quality, conventional in form . . . crudely amateurish, emotionally hollow, and leaden with homiletic pessimism." ¹ *Leaves of Grass*, the work of the poet's second period, was entirely different in every respect. The only trait common to both periods is "the recurring theme of death." ² Whitman himself realized the poor quality of his early poetry, for he banished all

¹ Floyd Stovall, editor, *Walt Whitman, Representative Selections*, Introduction, p. XXI.

² Ibid.
of it from Leaves of Grass. Had these earlier poems been his sole effort, Whitman never would have been known as a poet. His fame rests entirely upon his works published from 1855 on.

The beginning of the second poetic period was marked by the publication of Leaves of Grass in 1855. Whitman entered upon this later period with well-formed ideas as to what he wanted to say and how he wished to express himself. He had decided to write poetry characteristic of America and of Walt Whitman; to leave the past and all its traditions, and to write of the future of America, guided by science and democracy. Fortunately for us, Whitman was his own Boswell, and in later life, recorded the plans and preparations which resulted in Leaves of Grass. New readers of Whitman will do well to read "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," for the poet here explains his desire to leave the poetic past and write poetry distinctive of and commensurate with the greatness of America. This desire to write poetry entirely different from anything he had ever written was the germinal idea from which Leaves of Grass sprang, and was, perhaps, the reason for the wide

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3"A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Leaves of Grass, Inclusive Edition, edited by Emory Holloway, pp. 522-536. All references to Whitman's prose and poetry, unless otherwise stated, are made to Holloway's Inclusive Edition, which will be referred to hereafter as Leaves of Grass, Inclusive Edition. Long poems cited from Leaves of Grass are referred to by title, section and line, short poems by title only.
chasm separating Whitman's poetic periods. The poetry of his first period was trite, objective, and conventional, while that of the second period was unusual, subjective, and symbolic. Whitman had now become a poet with a message, a "song of his soul," which he must sing. What transformation had come over the poet's mind and heart, and revolutionized his powers?

All the poet's biographers concur in the fact that a great change had taken place in Whitman's mind during the last few years before the publication of the first slim volume of *Leaves of Grass*. Walt Whitman, the man of seemingly ordinary attainments, had now become Whitman, the introspective, brooding poet. The change was apparent in his person as well as in his poetry. Sometimes he appeared in the sturdy garb of the working man, or in loose-fitting clothes topped by an open-necked Byronic collar, in sharp contrast with the ordinary clothes of the men of the time. There are those who think he deliberately "dressed the part" in order to attract attention to himself, that he was a poser; but, could the man who has been called "the greatest personality . . . the greatest incarnation of mind . . . that has appeared in the world during the Christian era,"

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or who was said "to have had, perhaps, the most advanced nature the world has ever known,"\(^6\) be guilty of such belittling conduct? Surely not. Rather let us say that Whitman was individual enough to wear what he liked, even if it were a shirt with lace sewed upon the edges of its collar and cuffs, as a certain photograph taken in his old age portrays the poet. Be it as it may, all his biographers relate that some "sea-change" had come over Whitman's life in the years immediately preceding his second poetic period. Those who wish to read full discussions of this transformation may consult the biographies written by Binns, Holloway, Bazalgette, and Perry. All the critical writers agree that Whitman's work now had become immeasurably more valuable. His powers had become introspective, philosophical, and mystical. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, or Rousseau plodding to Vincennes,\(^7\) a vision, which was to change the course of his life and forcibly affect the thought of the world, had come to Whitman while he was pondering the ideas for *Leaves of Grass*. The poet explains this mystical experience in "Song of Myself."\(^8\) Perry explains the mystical quality of the poet's mind, after the transformation, in these words:

\(^7\)Bliss Perry, *Walt Whitman*, p. 278.
\(^8\)"Song of Myself," Section 5, ll. 6-17.
In the instinctive operations of his mind he was a Mystic, -- one of the persons who in every age and in every variety of formal religious faith have been innately and intensely conscious of the reality of spiritual things. In his capacity for brooding imaginative ecstasy he was Oriental rather than Western. Deep affinities allied him with the oldest literature of our Indo-European race; his . . . poetical style was formed largely upon that of the Old Testament. . . . His fondness for naming himself in his verse, his dervish-like passion for the endless Open Road, and even his catalogue method, have been noted as having singularly close parallels in the poetry of the East.\(^9\)

Students of psychology and literature have devoted much space to discussions of the revolution which took place in Whitman's art. Thought on the subject seems divided between two viewpoints: the mystical and the logical. Binns leans to the mystical viewpoint, but thinks the only mystery was that the change came through a fusing of natural forces inherent in Whitman's exceptional personality. He cannot explain this fusing process because it appears to belong to the highest of the stages of consciousness which the race has yet attained; and because there are many men and women of the finest intellectual training and the widest culture to whom it remains foreign.\(^{10}\)

In other words, the mystery to Binns is why all men are not able to see God in the grass, in weeds, and in all nature as Whitman did after the revelation of his oneness with God came to him.

\(^9\)Ferry, op. cit., pp. 276-277.

\(^{10}\)H. B. Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman, p. 69.
Bazalgette thinks perhaps that the journey to New Orleans and the love-shock Whitman experienced there in some way brought about a regeneration of the poet's spirit, and caused him to see himself, his fellow man, and the world in a new light. He thinks that after this time the poet had an inner call, to which he listened with real faith. With his newly-acquired powers he now read pages from the book of life with a greater understanding. He felt called to a mission. The spirit which had possessed him would not let him escape. Instead of being a bystander, he had now become a participant in life, "to be loved as he loves." While numberless people have experienced love, very few have emerged from the experience as seers or mystics; yet, as experience is the basis of knowledge, and it is true that we are a part of all that we have met, Bazalgette may not be wrong in saying that contacts with a new environment and new experiences may have awakened a new state of consciousness in the poet's mind, wherein he saw himself as an inspired interpreter of the book of life. Whitman now had become more aware of the fundamental verities. The mysteries of life and death were now open pages to his eyes. With the fervor of a convert, he began interpreting life and the universe through his own enriched experiences.

Other critics dismiss the mystical element in Whitman's metamorphosis and assign the change to purely natural causes. They think it a case of one departing from his youthful era, wherein he "saw through a glass darkly," into a period of mature judgment wherein he began to see life and the world "face to face." Stovall, in upholding the logical viewpoint, says:

Between 1847 and 1855 . . . he passed through a critical period of revolt and self-discovery, a kind of belated adolescence, from which he emerged a different person. The man of morals and sentiment gave place, temporarily at least, to the natural man, contemptuous of restraint, sensual, and frankly egoistic.

Materials for a complete history of the change do not exist, but much may be learned from his notebooks. . . . The strange volume of 1855 was not . . . an inspired improvisation, but an ambitious work planned . . . through a period of probably seven or eight years. It was the product of that physical, intellectual, and spiritual upheaval in which the liberated ego first looked upon its own divinity unveiled and was dazzled but unashamed. 12

Cleveland Rodgers sees nothing mysterious in the change which came over the poet. He traces the change to frustrations in Whitman's political views. Whitman, while editor of the Brooklyn Eagle, refused to compromise with his principles concerning the extension of slavery, and lost his job. Then he went to New Orleans, where his sojourn was brief. Returning to Brooklyn, he became editor of the Freeman, an organ of the Free Soil Democrats. As the Free

12Stovall, op. cit., pp. xxii-xxi.
Soilers were beaten, Whitman retired from national politics, though he never lost interest in the questions of his time. Rodgers thinks that as Whitman felt his ideas could never be realized through politics, he was driven back on his inner self and forced to look for other channels of self-expression. As a result, the disillusioned politician turned poet. His poetry became dominated by ideas carried over from a political and sociological background. The reformatory religious note that had pervaded his political ideas became stronger as he found himself working in a more suitable medium.  

When the poet in him revolted against the more sordid side of politics, he turned to poetry, not as a way of accomplishing what he had failed to accomplish in politics, but as an escape for his pent-up ideas.

Whitman himself tells us that a desire to express his own intellectual, emotional, and moral nature in poetry had long been "flitting through his previous life," or in some indefinite form had been "hovering on the flanks"; that is, the idea of writing a new kind of poetry had been teasing him for a long time.  

Although Whitman had become a mystic, none of the un-wholesome associations connected with the term may be applied

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13 Cleveland Rodgers, "Walt Whitman, the Poet of Democracy," *The Mentor*, II (September, 1923), 7-8.

to him. Binns believes the change came about as naturally as a bud unfolds into a flower. He thinks that this new state of mind emerged from some fusing of the poet's qualities and ended in a state of "unity and illumination," which, perhaps, the poet could not explain to himself. In simplest terms, mysticism implies that some minds have a direct knowledge of spiritual truths, attained intuitively. Bucke calls this mystical state of mind "cosmic consciousness," the highest form of awareness the mind knows. The acquisition of enlarged powers was not peculiar to Whitman alone. Other poets have had similar experiences. Shelley and Wordsworth give testimony to the fact that they were, at various times, acutely aware of periods of greater perceptive power. While practically all of Whitman's biographers note the mystical quality of his mind, they stress the fact that it meant simply an enrichment of his mind and heart. There was nothing occult or mysterious about this newer power. In his last poetic period, he seemed entirely aware of all phases of life, and even death itself had become a familiar topic in the poet's thinking.

As mysticism pervades many pages of *Leaves of Grass* and as many of its lines are expressed in symbolic language, let us see what the relation is between mysticism and symbolism. We know that after Whitman had become the thoughtful,
brooding mystic, he often expressed his ideas in symbolism never found in his first poetic period. Because the mystic deals with vague, indefinite ideas, he often falls back upon concrete symbols to help express his mystical ideas. For instance, a ship with all sails set, straining to start upon a voyage, becomes an apt symbol for man's soul about to depart upon the unknown sea of death. The analogy is easily recognized, and the poet has a visible symbol through which to express his ideas about the invisible soul. In his second period, Whitman found symbolism an invaluable medium of expression. The poet realized that his ideas were not always clear to the ordinary reader. He knew that many of his lines meant much more than met the eye. Masters tells us that Whitman said "something lay behind nearly every line of Leaves of Grass, but what that was, few, very few, only one here and there, are at all in a position to seize." He quotes the poet as saying further that the thought of his poems had been "studiedly concealed," and that some passages were left "purposely concealed."16 When the reader becomes lost in the mazes of certain passages in Leaves of Grass, he realizes that Whitman succeeded, perhaps beyond his intentions, in concealing his thoughts. There is certainly a definite relation between the poet's mysticism and his symbolism, for symbolism

16 Edgar Lee Masters, Walt Whitman, p. 234.
is entirely absent from his earlier poetry, written before the poet developed mystical tendencies.

Masters gives a list of the fourteen persons who, according to Bucke, have acquired the highly mystical state of cosmic consciousness. We are somewhat overawed to find Whitman in the list with Buddha, Dante, Mohammed, Paul, and Christ.\(^\text{17}\) If Whitman is rightly placed in this list of mystical thinkers, perhaps Bazalgette is right when he laments that only a small group of followers in America have realized Whitman's true significance as our greatest poet.\(^\text{18}\)

Perry thinks that Whitman should rank among the great thinkers, for he says the poet will be read by the intellectually fit for the next five hundred years.\(^\text{19}\) If Whitman is to dominate thought for ages to come, why have Americans generally been so slow to recognize his genius? The answer is simple. In many matters, Whitman was a hundred years ahead of his times. Many of his ideas were too advanced for his age. Another feature, which in his own times denied the poet a large group of readers and still keeps him from being widely read, is his mystical symbolic manner of expressing himself. Now that the times have caught up with Whitman's more advanced conception of the body and sex, and all agree upon the great need for

\(^{17}\text{Ibid., p. 86.}\)
\(^{18}\text{Bazalgette, op. cit., Introduction, p. xvi.}\)
\(^{19}\text{Perry, op. cit., p. 308.}\)
spiritual love, the poet's symbolism still denies him the large body of readers which *Leaves of Grass* should command. This obscurcation of thought through the use of symbolism is indeed a grave fault, for poetry to be great, should be simple and direct. Symbolism tends to make Whitman "a poet's poet" rather than the poet of the "divine average," or the common man, as he longed to be. Poets are accustomed to the use of symbolism; therefore, while Whitman has been the delight of the few, he has been the despair of the many. After the definite enlargement of his mental powers, Whitman unfolded his thoughts in language swathed in symbolism. Since the poet's ideas are no longer the stumbling blocks that they were in previous years, Whitman ought to be more generally read, for his philosophy is high indeed. New readers even now complain that much of his poetry is a riddle to them because they can not pierce the symbolism which clothes much of the poet's thought. Therefore, symbolic features of *Leaves of Grass* must be explained to the novice. Once he has the clue, he will enjoy looking for the symbols through which Whitman expresses his ideas about himself, his fellows, and the world. Whitman felt that he had an inspired call to preach a gospel of love as the law of life. The conviction has been growing for years

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that he expounds a gospel rich in the highest social con-
cepts. We should, then, master the impediment of symbolism
that denies us the profound doctrines contained in Leaves
of Grass.

After Whitman began to interpret life through the en-
larged powers of his second period, symbolism was largely
used as a medium for the expression of his philosophic and
often baffling ideas. All phases of life and nature had
now acquired greater meanings for the poet. This condition
is not unusual to the quickened poetic mind. Tennyson,
gazing at a flower plucked from a crannied wall, said if
he were able to understand everything concerning that simple
little plant, then he would also be more able to comprehend
man and God. Wordsworth had nothing but scorn for the man
who, looking upon a primrose by the river's brim, saw "only
that and nothing more." (Whitman, after the mystical union
of his soul with the universal soul, gazed on a spear of
summer grass, and grass straightway became highly symbolic
to his mind. After the poet began expressing his thoughts
through the medium of symbolism, much of his poetry has to
be explained to the average reader before he can grasp the
thought the poet is trying to express. Whitman's mystical
habits of expression have revealed his "vision of the unity
of the universe" to the few only. It is possible that as
time passes, other poets, stimulated by his powers, may
arrive who will be able to expound Whitman's mystical ideas through a medium better understood than the odd, symbolic utterances of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman himself expressed the idea that he was only the forerunner of greater poets who would justify his position that true poets are the seers of a nation. He says:

Poets to come! . . .
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, . . . greater than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me.21

As symbolism is an outstanding feature of *Leaves of Grass*, let us look into the matter of symbolism in general in order that we may be in a better position to understand why certain writers have found it such a useful device. Man has known of symbolism from earliest times. Generally speaking, symbolism implies a comparison of ideas based on real or fancied resemblances. Symbolism arises from the dual nature of words, words which may have both a figurative and a literal meaning. Words are only the signs or symbols which stand for thoughts and ideas. Man has known from the beginning that one sign or symbol may have two concepts. Take the word "sun," for instance. The cave man worshiped the sun because it was the source of light and heat. Thus the word "sun" suggested two things to his mind: the

21"Poets to Come."
picture or image of the sun, and also its attributes, light and heat. When the word "mother" falls upon our ears, it means not simply the female parent, but implies also the love which the true mother bestows upon her child. These simple instances serve to remind us that words often convey two distinct ideas.

Since words are endowed with two-fold meanings, then language, or groups of words, may also partake of this frequently confusing duality. Language is a crystallization of ideas by means of "tags" or "symbols" which we call words. We have seen that words may convey two ideas. We know that one man, reading the written page, may give the words a literal interpretation, while another, reading exactly the same words, may give them a figurative interpretation. Thus confusion arises as to what the written page means. Because language may express more than the eye sees, and is capable of both literal and figurative interpretations, much of our time is spent in trying to understand what others have written.

In order to understand the term symbolism, let us inquire into the meaning of the word. It stems from the word "symbol." A symbol is an object chosen to typify or represent some idea or quality in another object because of real or fancied resemblances in one or more of their common characteristics. The word "symbol" also means the sign or emblem
by which those persons initiated into any mystery or order make themselves known to one another. Gradually, the meaning of the word became extended until it came to denote every conventional representation of ideas by form, the revelation of the invisible by the visible. This last meaning of the word is the definition which interests us most in the present discussion. Without symbols there could be no language nor literature; hence symbolism, or the act of using symbols, is a most important factor in the language arts. In its general sense, we use symbolism daily without being conscious of it. When we say that he earned the "red badge" of courage, or that she wore the "white flower" of a blameless life, how tiresome it would be if we had to stop to explain the symbolisms of the expressions. A child knows why the lion is the symbol for courage, and the lamb for helplessness. Symbols are compressions of thought in which much of our knowledge is handily stored. Therefore, symbolism is a most useful device for the expression of ideas. In the particular sense, symbolism implies the use of imagery and fancy in literature.

Symons explains that symbolism, perhaps, antedates man and the created world! He says:

Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man as he named every living creature; or before then, in heaven when God named the world into being. We see in these beginnings exactly what
Symbolism is: a form of expression, at best but approximate, essentially arbitrary until it has obtained the force of a convention for an unseen reality apprehended by consciousness.  

The mystic, clinging to ideas derived from symbols, often arrived, by analogy, at a conclusion he could not prove, but felt to be true. For example, the medieval astronomer held that the earth was the center of the universe; but the mystic claimed the sun as the center, not through a better knowledge of things, but because, by analogy, he had placed his symbol for power, the sun, at the center of the universe. Not until the time of Copernicus was the mystic's faith in his symbol vindicated. As literature often deals with abstract subjects, symbolism and analogy are especially helpful as mediums for the expression of thoughts incapable of concrete proof or exact demonstration. In philosophical and religious writings this is especially true.

Carlyle was acutely aware of the part symbols play in the life of man. He explains that fantasy or imagination enters the realm of the senses and becomes incorporated therein in order that symbols may have meaning. He further says:

In the symbol proper . . . there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and, as it

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were, attainable here. By Symbols, accordingly, is man guided and commanded, made happy, made wretched. He everywhere finds himself encompassed with symbols, recognized as such or not recognized; the Universe is but one vast Symbol of God; nay, if thou wilt have it, what is man himself but a Symbol of God; is not all that he does Symbolical; a revelation to Sense of the Mystic God-given force that is in him? . . . Not a Hut he builds but is the embodiment of a Thought; but bears visible records of invisible things; but is in the transcendental sense, symbolical as well as real. 23

Binns tells us that Whitman often read the works of Carlyle, 24 and when we see how saturated *Leaves of Grass* is with symbolism, we may conclude they had drunk from the same cup. Symons and Carlyle have shown to what an extent symbols dominate our lives, whether we are aware of it or not.

All religions are replete with symbols which mean much more than the eye sees. By the time of the Middle Ages, Christianity had accumulated such a host of symbols that interpreters are needed to explain the intricate meanings hidden in the symbols of the paintings, tapestries, and sculptures of the time. To us, the lamb and the cross found in religious pictures are easily understood, but a Chinese would see in them, respectively, only a good meal or the instrument for a cruel form of punishment. The fact that the lamb is a symbol for Christ, and the cross the sign

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of man's redemption would have to be very carefully explained to the Chinaman. We must always remember with Carlyle that "in a symbol there is both concealment and revelation." As examples of the extent to which symbols enter into our thought, think of the star, the bells, and the candles at Christmas; of the Easter symbols of eggs and spring flowers, all symbolic of the Resurrection. The bread and wine used in the Lord's Supper are the holiest symbols of Christianity, but to the non-Christian their symbolic value is entirely lost.

All readers of the Bible know that much of it is to be understood from a figurative rather than from a literal viewpoint. David takes these symbols: a shepherd, his rod and his staff, green pastures and still waters, the anointing oil, an overflowing cup, and a prepared table, and from these symbols, in the twenty-third psalm, evolves the story of God's loving care which guides us through life and death, and prepares us "to dwell in the house of the Lord forever." When Christ partook of the last supper with his disciples, he gave them bread and wine, symbols of his body and blood, which today all Christians revere as the ultimate symbols of their redemption. Symbolism is so often employed in the Bible that a multiplication of instances is unnecessary here.

Our own literature has many striking examples of symbolism. As Poe has been called the founder of modern symbolism, let us look for instances of the device in his poetry. All know the story of "The Raven." As the bereaved lover sits in his shrouded room and sorrows for the "lost Lenore," a sable-hued raven flies in through the window from the "night's Flutonian shore." The "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird" croaks but one reply, "Nevermore," to the sad lover's wish that in another world he may again "clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore." The quality of verisimilitude is given the story by the fact that it is possible for the raven, like the parrot, to utter words. The raven croaking the ominous refrain, "Nevermore," then becomes the symbol for the sad thoughts which haunt the heart-broken lover as he ponders the death of his beloved.

"The Bells" furnishes another example of easily-grasped symbolism. The silver sledge bells are symbols of out-door merry-making in the snow, while the golden wedding bells are symbols of happy love for future days. Then the symbols change to those of fear and terror. The brazen bells of the fire alarm ring on the startled night, while the tolling iron bells, the funeral bells, "what solemn thoughts their monody compels."

"The Vision of Sir Launfal" supplies us with a most
beautiful example of symbolism. The poem results from thoughts entwined about these dominant symbols: Sir Launfal, the proud and haughty knight, the Holy Grail, the two lepers outside the castle walls. In the first part of the story, Sir Launfal, in the proud spring-time of his life, goes forth in high spirits to look for the Holy Grail, the cup Christ is said to have drunk from at the Last Supper. The knight is the symbol for man's arrogant pride; the cup, the symbol for Christ's reality. As the knight dashes forth from the castle to begin his quest, he disgustedly flings a golden coin to a leper crouched by the castle wall. Time passes; the knight, old and worn, returns in the dead of winter to his castle. He is dispirited, for his long search for the Grail has been in vain. Arriving at the castle gate, he sees a leper even more horrible than the one to whom he tossed a coin in scorn as he started his quest in the spring-time of the year. Life has taught him kindliness. So, compassionately approaching, Sir Launfal gives the leper a part of his crust of bread, breaks the ice from the stream and gives him a drink from his own drinking bowl; and lo! as the leper drinks from it, the wooden bowl becomes the Holy Grail, and the leper becomes the glorified image of Christ. Sir Launfal realizes that he does not have to search any longer for a mere cup to prove the reality of Christ. He has learned
that to love one’s fellows, no matter how loathsome they may be, is to have the reality of Christ in the heart.

In prose, Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter shows how valuable a visible symbol may become in developing a theme. The scarlet letter “A” upon Hester Prynne’s gray gown was the symbol of her sin; yet, because she felt her love right and pure, she hugged the symbol to her breast, and through its contemplation, purified her later life.

In recent years, two popular European dramas have helped the general public to a better understanding of symbolism. Chantecler, from the pen of the French symbolist, Edmond Rostand, is a social satire wherein barnyard fowls and other animals are the actors. The crowing cock becomes the symbol for man, proud of his achievements; the hen- pheasant is the symbol for woman as man’s comfort and consolation. Chattering guinea-hens are symbols for idle, gossiping society women; the sad and melancholy-looking turkey is the symbol for the gloomy philosopher. The dog, which continually worries the hen- pheasant, becomes a symbol for the evil forces which often beset woman’s path; creeping creatures, like toads and lizards, become symbols for evil, for the uglier side of life. Maeterlinck’s The Blue Bird has also been a helpful medium for making symbolism more generally understood. So popular has this
symbolic play been that it has been filmed, and on the screen we may see the dog, the symbol for faithfulness, and the cat, the symbol for ingratitude, portrayed even more realistically than was ever possible on the stage. The story, briefly told, is that of two children of a woodcutter who set out to look for the blue bird which they regarded as the symbol of happiness. They are followed on their journey by their household pets, a cat and a dog. The cat would betray them to their enemies, but the dog defends them from all harm. After many adventures, they return home to find the blue bird in their own bird cage. They open the door to admire the bird and it escapes. The fact that the bird was found at home and that it could so quickly take its flight are symbolic of the idea that happiness is often to be found in the near and the usual, and that it may leave us just as quickly as the bird flew from the sight of the children who thought they had at last found the blue bird of happiness.

Painting has been a popular medium for symbolism. "The Scapegoat," by Holman Hunt, and Watts's "Hope" are two well-known pictures that exemplify the work of the symbolist. Neither picture, although both are artistically executed, can be said to be beautiful. Unless the symbols within them express the ideas the artists wished to convey, the
pictures are worthless. When we learn that the Jews bound a red cloth, the symbol of their sins, around the horns of a goat, and then drove the animal off to die, thus repudiating their sins, we realize the significance of "The Scape-goat." A child wonders why a woman, with bandaged eyes, and so unable to see the one pale star in the sky, sits dejectedly atop the world with her ear bent to a lute whose strings are all broken but one. A man knows that just as long as the ear of faith can hear the faintest sound urged from the one-stringed lute by the hand of courage, there is still hope for the world.

Sculpture, like painting, is another field wherein symbolism plays a most important part. The statuary of ancient times is as valuable now as it was when it was created, for its symbolism is imprisoned for us in its ageless bronze or stone. The poised figure of Bologna's "Mercury Taking Flight," with his headdress, staff, and sandals decorated with outspread wings, is just as much the symbol of speed today as it was in the past. Another well-known statue is that of Cellini's "Perseus." The sturdy youth, one foot resting upon the slain body of his foe, an uplifted sword in one hand, while in the other he holds aloft the head of the dead monster, is the symbol for courage against all difficulties. Many pieces of statuary and many paintings are puzzling until their symbolism is understood.
The symbolist does not strive to present the beautiful alone; he strives to present an idea. Through visible symbols, the artist makes the effort to represent the invisible, the intangible. Unless the symbolist's work conveys a concept, he has failed in his purpose.

While we have seen that symbolism has always existed in thought and literature, whether we are conscious of it or not, it is with the conscious effort to express the invisible by the visible that we wish to deal. Subjective writers have been so largely dependent upon symbols to express their ideas that they have become known as "symbolists." The symbolist concerns himself with general truths instead of actualities; he exalts the metaphysical and the mysterious, and aims to unify and to blend the arts and the functions of the senses. Especially in literature, symbolists are reactionaries against realism, and aim to suggest rather than to draw hard and fast outlines.

America's first contribution to symbolism was made unknowingly, but it is highly important. Baudelaire and his followers discovered in the works of Edgar Allan Poe the foundation for modern symbolism. While Poe's contribution to symbolism was indirect and posthumous, yet after Baudelaire's discovery of the highly symbolic value of

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Poe's poetry, he may be ranked among the early symbolists. Shanks further adds that we may even date the beginning of the movement that is sometimes called the Decadence and sometimes Symbolism from this discovery of Baudelaire's.²⁷ We are indebted to the early symbolists who rebelled against the dominance of the external world, who denounced the conventional phrases and subjects of former poetic usage and insisted that poetry become more subjective and philosophical. The efforts of poets in France and England to liberate thought through symbolic poetry have greatly enhanced the value of poetry as a factor in the social scheme. Poetry is not simply the art of stringing rhymes together; it must express mature thought. Great poets are the spiritual guides, the men of vision, the seers and prophets of a nation; and poetry is only great when it becomes a medium through which profound truths and philosophies may be presented. The enriching and liberating elements found in modern symbolism have permeated recent poetry, greatly to the embellishment of the art.

Let us consider a summation of symbolism:

In a second, and more narrow sense, symbolism is the name given a literary movement in France and Belgium which developed during the 1880's. The symbolists . . . were chiefly poets, and their effort was to translate impressions of the senses through sound and rhythm in their writing. As a protest

²⁷Ibid., pp. 165-166.
against the starkness of realism, they sought to conceal outlines rather than to delineate them, and against the concreteness of former times they raised the banner of abstraction. In brief, it was their purpose to suggest rather than to sketch in the details of a scene or an emotion. And here they lost themselves -- at least so far as the uninitiated were concerned -- in the vagueness mentioned . . . as so often accompanying a private, esoteric symbolism. Verlaine gave the symbolists a motto which bespeaks their purpose . . . "No color, nothing but the lightest of shading."

The symbolists in some of their doctrines were related to the Pre-Raphaelite movement in England and were the precursors of the "free verse" and imagist poets of recent decades.

Symbolism implies the use of imagination and fancy in writing, music, and the plastic arts. The tendency in symbolism is to select some common aspect of a subject and dignify it with imaginative qualities in order that it may represent some religious, social, or philosophic concept. Through some visible sign or symbol the artist tries to present an intangible idea, a thought apprehended by the mind rather than an impression gained through the five senses.

Just as earlier English readers had to learn to adjust themselves to poetic changes in the works of Burns, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Byron, and later on to Swinburne's special type of poetry, just so have we had to learn to adjust ourselves to Whitman's free verse and his frequent use of symbolism. The writer has explained, earlier in the

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chapter, that Whitman had developed a mysticism which flowered, in 1855, in the slim book of verse called _Leaves of Grass_. In this volume he often found symbolism a most helpful device for the exposition of his mystical thoughts concerning such subjects as sexual and spiritual love, the body and the soul, death and immortality. The symbols he uses as centers around which to develop his thought are many. He found them in the natural world and in the elements. To some, his symbolisms are plain and illuminating. To others, they are confusing and serve to conceal rather than to reveal his thought. Let us remember that often we must search for the symbol's connotation, and that "in a symbol there is both concealment and revelation."

Whitman's innovations in poetic form, subject matter, and symbolic methods of expression, along with the works of other recent poets, have encouraged critical writers to think that English literature has now become more vital, more akin to the authentic classic tradition. We quote from _The New Poetry:

Modern influences which tend to make the art of poetry, especially English poetry, less provincial, more cosmopolitan, are by no means a defiance of the classic tradition... There is more of the great classic tradition, for example, in the _Spoon River Anthology_ than in the _Idylls of the King_. . . . And free verse rhythms of Whitman, Mallarmé . . . and others are more in line with the Biblical, the Greek, the Anglo-Saxon, and even the Shakespearean tradition, than are all the exact iambics of Pope and Dryden . . . or the closely woven metrics of Tennyson and Swinburne.
Whither the new movement is leading no one can tell. . . . But we may be sure that the movement is towards greater freedom of spirit and form, a more enlightened recognition of the international scope, the cosmopolitanism, of the great art of poetry.  

The fact that poets like Emerson, Rossetti, Swinburne, and Symonds agree that Whitman's free verse is poetry, encourages us to study it and try to find what qualities make it great poetry. The mystical qualities which appear in Leaves of Grass, coupled with an intricate symbolism, make it necessary for readers of Whitman to study these phases of his work if they aspire to an understanding of his mind and art. Modern symbolism is a thing accomplished, whether the general reading public likes it or not. Because Whitman's poetry, after he became a mystic, is highly philosophical and social in its nature, let us examine his use of symbolism in order that we may be able to understand the social concepts set forth in Leaves of Grass.

The superabundance of symbolism in Leaves of Grass creates the problem for this thesis. It is the writer's purpose to point out and elucidate examples of symbolism in Leaves of Grass in order that the reader may be more able to understand the high social worth of Whitman's poetry.

Whitman found symbolism a most useful device for the exposition of his mystical ideas. In fact, the poet employs symbolism in all phases of his work. The title for

his book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, is highly symbolic, as also are the division titles into which the book is divided. Many of his finest poems have valuable symbolic titles. In the following chapter the writer will show to what a great extent the poet employed symbolism even in titles for his poetic works.
CHAPTER II

SYMBOLISM OF TITLES

Man's mind readily admits the presence of two concepts under one sign or symbol; that is, many things can be understood in both a literal and figurative sense. For example, fire is a symbol for heat and light in the literal sense, while in its figurative sense, fire is a symbol of man's aspiration towards God because it tends to rise skyward and is chaste in its nature. Whitman's cosmic mind went far past the two-concept idea. He says that certain words, like "I, myself," the "human body," the "earth," "air," and "fire," have myriad meanings. He called these unusually suggestive words "the earth's words."¹ He saw them as symbols for numerous ideas; yet the poet's thoughts frequently over-taxed even the powers of his "earth's words" or master words when his ideas became highly mystical. Like other poets, Whitman felt he could not always express his thoughts in a manner which others could readily understand. He says:

¹"A Song of the Rolling Earth," Section 1, ll. 1-4, 9, 14-15.

31
Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself, It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically, Wait you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?

Whitman, like Tennyson, wished, "And I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me." Whitman was especially plagued with the inability of words to express his manifold ideas. He says that we have expected "too much of articulation." He thinks that the meanings of many words lie latent just as buds of shrubs are latent in the branches. He was trying constantly to make his language a more forceful medium for expression. In his effort to accomplish this end, he became acutely aware of the part symbols might play in making speech better serve his aims. In fact, symbolism is an outstanding feature of his later poetic period. His theory of words as symbols is interesting and unique. These ideas are found in "A Song of the Rolling Earth."

A brief survey of "A Song of the Rolling Earth" will give us Whitman's own view of words as symbols. He asserts that the letters of a word do not make the word. The true meaning of the word is contained in what the word connotes. This idea is known to all in the familiar phrase, "the letter

2"Song of Myself," Section 25, ll. 7-9.
3Ibid., l. 10.        4Ibid., l. 11.
killeth, but the spirit maketh alive." In the first lines of the poem, the poet says:

Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines? those curves, angles, dots?
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground and sea,
They are in the air, they are in you.

Human bodies are words, myriads of words,

Air, soil, water, fire -- those are words,
I myself am a word with them .

A healthy presence, a friendly or commanding gesture, are words, sayings, meanings,
The charms that go with the mere looks of some men and women, are sayings and meanings also.5

These lines express the poet's idea that often words are not simply the names of things alone, but are symbols for various ideas. Whitman thinks that the true poet unerringly chooses these master words. He says these words are felt rather than heard: "The masters know the earth's words and use them more than audible words."6 Whitman insists that though the poet knows and uses these pregnant key-words, still he is not always able through the medium of language to transmit exactly his ideas about the soul and the universe. In support of this idea, notice these lines:

The truths of the earth continually wait .
They are calm, subtle, untransmissible by print

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5 "A Song of the Rolling Earth," Section 1, 11. 2-4, 7, 9-10, 12-13.
6 Ibid., 1. 15.
I swear I begin to see little or nothing in audible words,
All merges toward the presentation of the unspoken meanings of the earth,
. . . . . . . . . . . .
Toward him who makes the dictionaries of words that print cannot touch.\(^7\)

Because the poet feels the limits put upon his powers by language, he exclaims:

I swear I see what is better than to tell the best,
It is always to leave the best untold.
When I undertake to tell the best I find I cannot,
. . . . . . . . . . . .
I become a dumb man.\(^8\)

The gist of "A Song of the Rolling Earth" is that, despite his best efforts, the poet is not always able to communicate himself fully through the literal meaning of words. Their symbolic value must be understood also. Whitman felt, as the poem just discussed shows, that "language is but an understood hint of experience, and that men must live fully before they can comprehend the language of a full life."\(^9\)

Hence words often fail to convey ideas equally to men because of inequalities in their experiences. Whitman tries to bring the reader to a realization of his soul's experiences. He employs many "earth's words," words rich in

\(^7\)Ibid., 11. 21-22; Section 3, 11. 9-10, 12.

\(^8\)Ibid., Section 3, 11. 13-15, 18.

\(^9\)Emory Holloway, *Whitman, an Interpretation in Narrative*, p. 152.
symbolic value, in his efforts to make us see what his more acute faculties have grasped clearly and easily.

George Rice Carpenter, a thoughtful critic of *Leaves of Grass*, thinks Whitman derived his symbols from memories of words seen, heard, spoken, and written. He says that as long as Whitman used symbols gained by the eye alone, he wrote conventional, trite poetry. It was only when he conceived himself as speaking that "a new inner rhythm sprang up in him." While he does not attempt to give the steps by which concepts are acquired, Carpenter explains that the poet's words are but "the crude and outward symbols of that inner language, that subtle play of mental imagery, that unusual and individual combination of percepts which is his real distinction." Whitman, being unlettered, was not greatly influenced by words seen or written, but words spoken by himself or by others made the greatest impression on him. When the poet trusted his ear and his voice, the floodgates of inspiration swung open and the great masses of inter-allied matter in his poetic mind were nourished by these floods of ideas received through the ear and the voice, and a characteristic, individual form of expression resulted.\(^\text{10}\) Whitman's predilection for symbolic methods of expression is one of the outstanding characteristics of *Leaves of Grass*.

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\(^{10}\)George Rice Carpenter, *Walt Whitman*, pp. 42-45.
The very title of the book, *Leaves of Grass*, is symbolic. Grass was a symbol to Whitman. In the opening lines of "Song of Myself," he tells us how, on that memorable summer morning, after the mystical union of his soul with the universal soul, he was suddenly at peace with the world when his eye fell on a blade, "a spear of summer grass." In his revivified mind, this "leaf" of grass took on a new importance. As he gazed on it, he realized that a thing as insignificant as one spear of grass was weighted with imponderable, illimitable ideas.

A child said What is the grass? \ldots 
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.\footnote{"Song of Myself," Section 6, l1. 1-2.}

But he now saw that grass meant much more than he had formerly suspected. While Whitman was choosing a title for the slim book of verse that was to be published in 1855, his mind must have gone back to the lines quoted above in the longest poem of the little book. (He thought of each poem as "a leaf of grass --," a thing small in itself, worthless by itself. Then he perceived that the aggregate value of many "leaves of grass" was great. He saw grass as the verdure covering the fields and binding the soil in its place. He saw grass nourishing animals, which, in turn, help to sustain man. If the combined leaves of grass of the
field were valuable, why, then, would not his combined poems also become valuable to man? Perhaps his poems, taken together, might bind man into brotherhood just as grass binds the particles of soil and keeps it from disintegration. Just as grass furnishes food for the animal world, just so, the poet hoped his *Leaves of Grass* would nourish the soul of man. Properly understood, the title, *Leaves of Grass*, expresses what the book contains and is. Like the grass of the fields, the subject matter of the poems is as old as the world. Yet, because its character is so vital, the poetry is as fresh and as new as the grass of each succeeding summer. Whitman wanted his poems to be as democratic as grass, which is found "growing among black folks as among white." He wanted his "Leaves" to have the universality of grass, to be as widely distributed as grass is.

The choice of the title was a happy one, for the poet could add other "Leaves" as they grew from his fertile imagination. As he wrote more poems, Whitman issued them as separate volumes. Then, later on, after he had revised the earlier poems, he would add new poems and issue a new edition. By this means, Whitman's published poems grew from the thin ninety-page volume of 1855 to the thick volume of more than four hundred pages published shortly before his death in 1892. From the first edition to the
"death-bed edition," the poet supervised the printing of his poems. Holloway says that the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was set up by Whitman himself in the printing shop of his friends, the Rome brothers.\(^{12}\) At first glance, it seems unusual for the poet to print his own work, that he had to be both "father and mother," so to speak, to *Leaves of Grass*; yet, because it was so very much a part of the man himself, it is perhaps significant that Whitman preferred to bring his "child" into the world.

Just as Whitman was fortunate in selecting a symbolic title for the book, he was also fortunate in selecting appropriate and suggestive names for the division titles of *Leaves of Grass* as they finally appear in approved editions of his complete works. Obviously, it would have been impossible for Whitman to choose division titles to which every poem of all the groups was definitely related. In some cases the titles suggest a period in the poet's career, as "From Noon to Starry Night," or "Sands at Seventy." In other cases, the division title is closely related to every poem of the group as in "Sea-Drift." In the third case, the title may refer only to a few definite poems in the group. With a volume of work so great as *Leaves of Grass*, the poet was forced to place some poems not directly related

\(^{12}\)Holloway, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
to the division head in the group. The writer proposes to point out the symbolic implications of the various division titles as they appear in Holloway's Inclusive Edition of Leaves of Grass. The title of the first general division is "Inscriptions." At first glimpse, there seems to be little suggestive in the name, but if one glances at Walt Whitman's signature facing the first page, then he sees that the title suggests that "I, Walt Whitman, have inscribed these thoughts of the body and the soul, of one's self, of these States, of America singing, of greater poets to come, inspired by my poetic genius." There is a note of prophetic sureness to the nine lines which preface "Inscriptions." It is as if the "hand of fate, having writ, moved on." The poet has a feeling from the beginning that his poetry will endure.13

"Children of Adam," as a division title, is very closely related to all the poems of this small but dynamic group. The subject matter dealt with is the love between man and woman. To Whitman, there was something spiritual about procreation, and he wrote these poems with the candor of the ancient Greeks. The symbolic nature of the title is easily perceived. Perhaps the title was derived from the poem "To the Garden the World," wherein the poet conceives himself as a reincarnation of the original Adam, newly

13See "Song of Myself," Section 52, ll. 15-16; "Full of Life Now."
returned to the world, with Eve, his "equal opposite," follow-
ing him, or, at times, leading him. Just as Adam and Eve are symbolic of procreation, so will he, the poet, united with his Muse, Eve, in "the garden," or the world, create poems to inspire the race. If the poet is another Adam, then his "offspring," his poems, are properly the "children" of Adam.

Whitman, in a letter written to W. M. Rossetti, explained the symbolic meaning of the title "Calamus." He writes that calamus is a type of tall, sedge-like grass which grows around the edges of ponds in the Northern and Middle States. Sometimes it reaches the height of three feet. It is often called "sweet flag." The plant grows from a central root and this forces the leaves or blades into close relation. The leaves have a pleasant aroma when crushed. The poet went on to explain that the spiritual sense in which he used "Calamus" for a title arose from the fact that the calamus plant presents the hardiest and longest leaves of any grass-like plant.14 The close formation of the calamus leaves suggested the union that would exist between men if they loved one another as brothers. Whitman looked upon this type of love as spiritual, as opposed to love between the sexes. The love of man for mankind the poet praises as the highest type of love. Whitman

used the sturdy, close-growing, aromatic calamus plant as a symbol for this exalted type of love. It suggested to the poet that just as the calamus leaves spring from a common stock, each man springs from the race, but is bound to his fellows by race-ties just as the calamus leaves are joined at a central root. Whitman hoped that his songs of the love of man for mankind would be the greatest "leaves" or poems of Leaves of Grass.

"Birds of Passage" brings us to the middle section of Leaves of Grass. It is, perhaps, suggestive of passing phases of life in the America of the late 1860's or thereabout. The westward movement had carried America to the Pacific, and the age of industrial development was beginning. Pioneers were getting as scarce as the passenger pigeon, but Whitman had been inspired by the sturdy men, the "Western youths," the "Colorado men," "the men from Nebraska and Arkansas," who, with their brave wives and sturdy sons and daughters, had built a new empire in the West. "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" and "Year of Meteors" both give evidence of passing phases in our national history.

For a group of poems wherein the poet mentions the sea, the seashore, the ocean, or ships in every poem, "Sea-Drift" is an excellent heading. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" dominates this group with its sea-born motif. This is another group where the individual poems are nicely
related to the symbolic topic of the section. "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" gives point to the nature of the general title. In this poem the elements contrasted are the material ocean, life, and the immaterial ocean, death. The habitat of God is in the unknown ocean of death, where all the streams of life empty. Just as the sands drift on the shores of the earthly ocean, knowing no reason for their existence, so men's souls drift inevitably to the realms of death, not knowing why. The poet sees man drifting from the shores of life to the shores of death, even as flotsam and jetsam are borne on the ocean. "Sea-Drift" indicates poems of Whitman's middle, contemplative life, wherein he had become acquainted with mysteries of bereavement and death. 15

"By the Roadside" follows "Sea-Drift," but it is full of doubt and seems, in a way, the least inspired section or division of Leaves of Grass. Whitman has this characteristic in common with other great poets: after their outstanding poetry, as a rule by far the smaller portion of their works, has been read, there is a great mass of it that will seldom be read by any except students searching for some particular purpose. "By the Roadside" comes under this heading in Leaves of Grass. The title may signify that the poems are of as little value as vegetation by the roadside,

15H. B. Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman, p. 287.
or it may have been derived from the remark of a friend who told the poet that he had dropped enough by the roadside from different editions to make a volume.\textsuperscript{16} The group certainly can not be compared with "Sea-Drift" which it succeeds and "Drum-Taps" which follows it. It is a collection of "odds and ends," which suggests the symbolic nature of the title. Just as we find a miscellaneous collection of plants by the roadside, here we find a diverse group of poems which possess no particular unifying motif. The only poems which may be classed together are three which denounce political situations. "A Boston Ballad" begins the satirical vein. Here the poet with biting scorn flays the Bostonians who dethroned King George, but are tyrannical enough to invoke the might of the United States against a fugitive slave. Continuing his discontent with political situations, the poet adds "Europe, the 72nd. and 73rd. Years of These States" to "By the Roadside." Here the poet laments the fact that the men of Europe have not been able to oppose recent tyrants. He says that the corpses of martyrs hung from gibbets will be the seed for future vengeance for the murdered dead. That

\begin{quote}
They live in other young men O Kings!
They live in brothers again ready to defy you,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots
\end{quote}

Liberty let others despair of you -- I never despair of you. 17

The poet closes the section with a bitter denunciation of political corruption at home, where he compares the politicians in Washington to "bats and night-dogs askant in the capitol." 18

Just as Whitman's powers apparently were beginning to lag for lack of inspiring topics, a new incentive came for his muse in the war-inspired division known as "Drum-Taps." The beating of the drum has for ages been the symbol for men to spring to arms in defense of all they hold dear. Hence it is entirely fitting that Whitman chose this title for his Civil War poems. Perry quotes the poet as saying that he was

mainly satisfied with "Drum-Taps" because [they showed the action of the times] . . . with their fluctuations of despair and hope . . . with the unprecedented anguish of the wounded and suffering. . . . The book is . . . unprecedentedly sad . . . but it also has the blast of the trumpet and the drum pounds and whirls in it, and then an undertone of sweetest comradeship and human love threads its steady thread inside the chaos and is heard at every lull. . . . Truly . . . it has clear notes of faith and triumph. 19

"Drum-Taps" was being printed when the news came on

17 "Europe, the 72nd. and 73rd. Years of These States."

18 "To the States, to Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentila."

19 Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman, pp. 150-151.
that fateful mid-April morning in 1865 that Lincoln had been assassinated the night before. The lilac scent filled the air around Whitman's doorstep and the perfume of these flowers became forever associated with the lost leader, so, naturally, the next division of the book contains the poems symbolic of Lincoln, headed by "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Lincoln was the symbol for this group, although his name is not mentioned in any of the poems. Every school child today knows that Lincoln was the "captain" in "O Captain! My Captain!"

Binns says that "Autumn Rivulets" are discursive and peaceful after the storm. In 1876 Whitman saw the sixth edition of his poems published. It was known as the Centennial Edition, and is in two volumes. The first was Leaves of Grass; the second, Two Rivulets. The latter contained both prose and poetry. It included eighteen new poems, among which were the "Ox-Tamer," "Eidólons," "Prayer of Columbus," "Song of the Redwood Tree," and "Passage to India." Whitman said that the title, Autumn Rivulets, symbolized "two flowing chains of prose and verse, emanating the real and the ideal." Whitman was at the height of his career when "Passage to India" was written. He was about fifty years old, and there were premonitions that he was

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20 Binns, op. cit., p. 287.

21 Perry, op. cit., p. 217.
approaching the decline of his powers. The days of the "scar and yellow leaf" were to come early to the poet because of illness. He was approaching a premature autumn, for although he was to live for more than twenty years, yet he never afterwards equalled "Passage to India," in some respects his greatest poem. Time has proved "Autumn Rivulets" was a fitting symbolic title for this section of his works, for autumn is symbolic of harvest and decline.

"Whispers of Heavenly Death" is a section wherein the poet gives expression to many moods; first to rebellious doubts, and finally to triumphant faith. The theme of the group is chiefly about death, or the setting-free of the soul from the body. Some of the first poems of the group express faltering doubt as to the soul's final goal; a dim star appearing and disappearing, becomes the symbol for fluctuating moods of hope and doubt. "Assurances" counters the moods of doubt, for here the poet tells us that just as life is well-provided for, "Death, the purport of life, is also well-provided for." He counsels us not to mourn untimely deaths, for they are parts of God's plans which our sodden senses do not yet comprehend. He says:

I do not think Life provides for all and for Time and Space, but I believe Heavenly Death provides for all.23

22"Whispers of Heavenly Death."
23"Assurances."
"Chanting the Square Deific" is perhaps the most interesting poem of the section, for here the poet develops the square as a symbol for deity. Contrasted with the unorthodox ideas of "Chanting the Square Deific" is the very orthodox conception of the soul found in "A Noiseless Patient Spider." The spider, trying to anchor its web to some safe support, becomes a symbol for man's soul striving to attach itself to the universal soul.

Whitman gave a great deal of his thought to contemplations concerning death. While his experiences with death in the hospitals of the Civil War are reflected in "Drum-Taps" and later sections of *Leaves of Grass*, they were not the foundation for his preoccupation with the subject, for he had written much about death before the war. The poet looks upon death as the other half of the cycle of immortality. He regards death as a fact as natural as birth, and never shrinks from it as the "last enemy," but welcomes it as "heavenly." He thinks death ushers us into new beginnings instead of being the final catastrophe. Dark or obscuring clouds are favorite symbols of death with Whitman.

"Whispers of Heavenly Death" is a valuable symbolic title. Whispers become appropriate symbols for thoughts of

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24"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Section 2, l. 3; "Whispers of Heavenly Death"; "On the Beach at Night."
death, for who can do other than "whisper" or "hint" concerning that of which he has no real knowledge? These "whispers of death" are as vague as "the ripples of unseen rivers" or the "gentle plashing of tears," yet Whitman welcomes them as "heavenly" or delightful. He feels sure that his soul moves to a final terminus of good; therefore his view of death has no element of sadness. It is boldly questing and triumphant in tone. Death becomes a welcome adventure upon unknown seas, for "are they not all the seas of God?"

"From Noon to Starry Night" indicates a period of time approaching the middle or noon-time of the poet's life. When noon is reached, we know the day will shortly decline. So noon became a symbol to the poet that perhaps a decline of his poetic powers had begun. The later part of the title, "Starry Night," indicates that Whitman is not unhappy as he realizes that he is past his prime in more ways than one. Binns describes these poems as a miscellaneous group of belated or "Indian summer poems."

"Songs of Parting" carries its own explanation. The poet is entranced with the idea that his soul is to set out on the long journey to eternity. "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!" and "Now Finale to the Shore" are typical of the joy the old

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25"Whispers of Heavenly Death."

26"Passage to India," Section 9, l. 31.
sailor, Whitman, feels at departing, and "So Long!" stands at the end of the section, just as it did in 1860. A joyous farewell to life is the symbol for this group.

But "Songs of Parting" proved a premature farewell. In 1889, "Sands at Seventy" appeared in the eighth edition of his works. It was a one-volume quarto of nine hundred pages, and contained the complete poems and prose works. The book was autographed and there was a portrait from life. The new pieces in this edition were taken from November Boughs, which had been published in 1888.27 Whitman was in his seventieth year, and the title was appropriately chosen, for the sands of time had nearly run through the hour-glass of his life, but not as nearly as the poet felt, for he was to add two more sections to Leaves of Grass before the sands had run completely through!

In 1891, Whitman issued a small book of poems with the pathetic title, "Good-Bye My Fancy." In the preface note to the second annex of 1891, the poet asks if it would not be better for him in his old age, to withhold the little "tag ends and fringe-dots" of poems that had hung around in the edges of his mind all his life. He answers the question by saying that although he knows there is no great demand for his poems, he will amuse himself by writing this collection in his seventy-second year. He calls himself "a

time-bang'd old conch with no powers of locomotion," but, as the day is sunny and fine, he forgets his helpless condition, and feeling almost like "a part of some frolicsome wave, or a kid or a kitten," he indites his poems of farewell. The poet says that perhaps the emotions of the war-years have reduced him to his sad physical condition. He wonders if the America of the present can ever realize what it cost the men of the past to preserve the union. From these musings came "Good-Bye My Fancy." In this group of poems, the poet takes leave of his poetic muse. Holloway says that Traubel had to superintend much of the work; and it looked as if the fearfully stricken poet would not live to see it through the press. To everyone's surprise, however, Whitman survived to send copies of the "deathbed edition" to his friends! The poems are the utterances of certain belated elements in his life-experiences, without which his book would be incomplete. Some review his past; others anticipate his future. On March 26, 1892, the sands of life had finally run through, and his soul set sail with "his Fancy, his dear love," for the portless seas of death.

Even this was not the end of Leaves of Grass! Whitman had, in his last days, prepared another little handful of poems which he had directed his friends, Bucke, Traubel, and Harned, to issue under the title of "Old Age Echoes," a

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29Carpenter, op. cit., p. 163.
title chosen by the poet himself. Even from the grave, he added to *Leaves of Grass*.

We have seen that Whitman chose a general title and subdivision titles for his work that helped epitomize his ideas. He carried this habit of symbolic titles on to the individual poems. Let no one think that Whitman's choice of titles came easily. A study of his work shows that he revised many of his titles, usually gaining a more suggestive and poetic name in the revision, but not always.

"Song of Myself" is an excellent illustration of the fact that the title for the poem may contain the symbol or germ around which the thought of the poem is developed. The uninitiated reader, thumbing through *Leaves of Grass*, is sure to think that he is about to read the saga of Walt Whitman, the man, as he glimpses the title, "Song of Myself." The initiated reader knows that it is not the personal story of the man, Walt Whitman, but a record of Whitman's soul-states and emotions as the poet sees himself as the prototype of the race. The poet, in the opening lines of "Song of Myself," shows that he means to interpret the lives of all through his own experiences, for he says:

\[
\ldots \text{what I assume you shall assume,}
\]
\[
\text{For every atom belonging to me as good}
\]
\[
\text{belongs to you.}^{30}
\]

---

^{30}"Song of Myself," Section 1, ll. 2-3.
Whitman in no uncertain terms proclaims himself as the archetype:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking
and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and
women or apart from them. 31

The poet's first choice for the poem we now know as "Song of Myself" was "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American." 32 There are those who think the latter title more appropriate. At any rate, Whitman himself is the symbol around which "Song of Myself" revolves.

The title, "Song of the Answerer," seems more poetic and symbolic for a poem which explains that the poet is the seer or man of vision for the nation, than was the original title, "Poem of the Poet," found in the first edition. 33 The poem insists that the great poet is the creator of ideas for the nation. He is the "answerer." "The Answerer" or great poet, is the symbol for the true creative genius.

The average reader, perhaps, wonders why "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" should be chosen as the title for the poem commemorative to Lincoln. The germ of the whole poem is found in the word "lilacs." The lilacs of mid-April perfumed the air around the poet's Brooklyn home

31 Ibid., Section 24, ll. 1-3.
32 Masters, op. cit., pp. 88-89.
33 Ibid., p. 89.
as the tragic news of Lincoln's death was unfolded. Just as his senses were saturated with the faint but compelling perfume of lilacs, just so was the poet's mind flooded with reverential memories of the slain leader. While Whitman pondered in the lilac-perfumed twilight, memories of Lincoln mingled in his senses with the scent of lilac flowers, and the lilac became ever afterwards a symbol of love and friendship. To the end of his days, when lilacs bloomed, Whitman devotedly recalled his memories of Lincoln.

"Passage to India" is another poem whose title is rich in symbolic values. Whitman was about fifty years of age when this poem was written, and, it seems, at the apex of his power as a symbolist. At no time does the poet contemplate a journey to India. Because man has made the circumnavigation of the globe easier through better means of travel and communication, the poet feels the nations of the earth are more closely interwoven. The annihilation of time and space should bring about an interchange of ideas between the western world, the symbol for progress, and the eastern world, symbolized by India, the land of racial beginnings and mystical ideas. The title, "Passage to India," is symbolically an excellent choice.

Poets and writers generally have striven for suggestive titles. Whitman was often fortunate in choosing some sign
or symbol definitive of his individual poems. We have seen
that the titles to his longer poems are excellently symbolic
of their subject matter. Let us notice the titles of a few
of the shorter poems. The poem we now know as "This Com-
post" was once called "Wonder at the Resurrection of the
Wheat."
To the writer, this title is not nearly so sym-
bolical as the present title. As the forms of animals and
plants decay in the earth, the earth is enriched, and from
this decayed matter or "compost," new life springs. Thus
compost or decay becomes the symbol for fresh, new life.

"Scented Herbage of My Breast" is a typical symbolic
title for one of the chief poems from the "Calamus" group.
The poems of true friendship are the "scented herbage"
which springs from the poet's "breast," his heart or mind.
Just as the crushed leaves of the calamus plant give off
an invigorating odor, the poet hopes these poems from his
heart will be redolent of the tenderest, the highest senti-
ments of the race, the selfless love of man for his fellows.

"Here the Frailest Leaves of Me" is a poem where the
title is almost as long as the poem itself. But it carries
much in little. The "frailest leaves of me" are the poet's
poems of "adhesiveness," or spiritual love. Because this
form of love is least practiced, least understood, and most
delicate in sentiment, the poet calls the poems that refer
to true spiritual love the frailest of his "leaves" or poems.
A poem with a fine symbolic title is "Song of the Broad-Axe." The opening lines contain one of the finest bits of description in Whitman's poetry. The broad-axe of the pioneer is, of course, the symbol of early American civilization. The poet sees the axe felling forests, clearing roads, hewing timber for bridges, houses, and ships, all of which were needed for the progress of civilization in the early days of our country. In the New World, the axe is the symbol of democratic progress.

Whitman's touch of the gypsy made him like a road for a symbol. In "The Song of the Open Road," the poet sees life as a road, stretching out before him. As he travels the highway of life, he meets men and women journeying on the road also. As a guide and companion, he knows their joys and their sorrows, their successes and their failures. He is willing to give them something more precious than money -- the love of an understanding comrade. Holloway says this is "one of the most buoyant, courageous, stimulating poems in the English language; that the very symbolism confesses the poet's inability to deal with so broad and elusive a subject except by suggestion."34

Whitman's use of personal pronouns in titles often confuses the new reader. In no case do they refer to the poet as a man, but to the poet as the interpreter for the race

34Holloway, op. cit., p. 179.
as in "Song of Myself," or to his poetic powers as in "A Woman Waits for Me," or to his works as in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand." This last is not a poetic or even an interesting title, but it contains a symbol, which if early pointed out, will keep the new reader from wondering who the poet means. The key-word is the pronoun "me."

Whitman uses the pronoun here just as he did in "A Woman Waits for Me." It does not refer to Whitman the man, but to his book, Leaves of Grass. When you are holding his book in your hand, that is, reading the poet's work, you must make up your mind to understand him; to follow and be guided by him, or you will not understand him. A misconception of his theories might do one a great deal of harm; therefore, learn his real doctrines. He fears that very few "candidates for his love" -- his readers -- will be "victorious," or gain a real knowledge of his work.

There are many other short poems in Leaves of Grass where Whitman illustrates his ability to choose provocative and telling symbolic titles, but the writer will mention only a few of them. "Tears" is a most apt title for a poem delineating the suppressed, controlled sorrow of the world, for have tears not been an age-long symbol of sorrow? "Old Ireland" gives us a glimpse of the sorrow an ancient country knows when her sons have to seek a new country in which to expand. This poem shows that as sons of the old country
increase in the New World, they found another Ireland, and thus Ireland, through each new generation, becomes the symbol for immortality. "The Dismantled Ship" is the very fitting title for a poem wherein the poet sees himself, in his old age, as useless and as helpless as the hulk of some "old, dismasted, gray and batter'd ship, disabled, done, haul'd up and hawser'd in some unused lagoon." Whitman was very fond of a ship as a symbol. He uses it frequently.35

Trees were potent symbols for Whitman. The "Song of the Redwood-Tree" and "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" are poems whose titles contain symbols highly suggestive. The redwood-tree became a symbol of something distinctively American, as it is found only here. Whitman uses it as a symbol for himself as a truly American or native poet. The sturdy live-oak tree, growing alone in majestic splendor, became a symbol for spiritual love in a characteristic poem in the "Calmus" series.

The present writer likes the cheerful air Whitman gives his songs of farewell. There is no "moaning of the bar" as his soul sets out to sea. He looks on death as an ending here, but as a joyous beginning in other realms; therefore the happy note of questing adventure in such poems as "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!" and "Now Finalé to the Shore." In the first

35See "The Ship Starting," "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!" "Passage to India," Section 8, ll. 3-5; Section 9, l. 28.
poem, the poet uses the term "shipmate" as a symbol for his departing soul. A ship with all sails set, cutting her hawser's and making for the open sea, was a symbol for the departing soul which pleased Whitman greatly. Now as the body, symbolized by the departing ship, is ready to slip off to eternity, he hails his soul as a "shipmate" on the voyage. In the second poem, the poet visualizes himself as the "old sailor" setting out upon the "endless cruise," or the sea of death. The "shore" departed from is life. The shore as a symbol for life is another favorite device in Leaves of Grass. The air of buoyancy in the farewell poems is the consequence of Whitman's feeling that "in a farewell there lurks much of the salutation of another beginning."36 He exemplifies this idea in "Good-Bye My Fancy!" his poem of farewell to his poetic Muse. He says:

Good-bye my Fancy!
Farewell dear mate, dear love!
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Long have we lived, joy'd, caress'd together,
Delightful! -- now separation -- Good-bye my Fancy.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Good-bye -- and hail! my Fancy.

Whitman was fortunate in his choice of symbolic titles for his book, its subdivisions, and for many of the individual poems. Let us now look for the sources of his symbolism.

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CHAPTER III

SOURCES OF SYMBOLISM

Whitman wanted his poetry to be characteristic of America. He wanted it to be fresh and vital, indicative of a new, strong, democratic country. He wished it to be read by the working men and women, who, he said, were to be in his pages "from first to last." It was his hope that his poetry would inspire the "democratic average" just as surely as the feudal poets had inspired the nobility of older times to "ranges of heroism and loftiness." He said he wanted his poems "to be in spirit the poems of the morning,"¹ that is, invigorating, inspirational. In order to accomplish his purpose, he had resolved to abandon all conventional themes and forms. He said that there should "be no stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high exceptional personages of Old-World song; nothing . . . for beauty's sake -- no legend, or myth, or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme."² What, then, would there be left for him to write about? Here is the answer: his poetry would sing of "the broadest average of humanity . . . in the now-

² Ibid., p. 524. 

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ripening Nineteenth Century, and especially in each of their countless examples and practical occupations in the United States of to-day.³ After the poet has told us he will use no high personages or conventional themes as subject matter, he finally lets us in on the secret: he is going to attempt "to put a person, a human being on record," and that person is to be himself.⁴ In writing Leaves of Grass, Whitman kept his promises. His poetry derives much of its distinction from the fact that he abandoned bookish themes and went to man and nature⁵ for his subjects. The omission of all narrative and romantic interests makes Leaves of Grass very largely a book of mystical philosophy, a subject not popular with the general reader. The poet's ideas are often expressed through symbolism because that is the literary device most suited to the expression of the intangible. These two features, philosophic subject matter and symbolism, combined to make Whitman but little read in his own day, and even now he does not have the readers his high social teachings would attract if persons of average ability were able to pierce his symbolisms.

After Whitman's inspiration, vividly recounted in "Song of Myself,"⁶ the poet became acutely aware of himself,

³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., p. 535.
⁵Edgar Lee Masters, Walt Whitman, p. 173.
⁶"Song of Myself," Section 5, ll. 1-17.
of his fellows, of all living things, and even of insensate objects, all of which had a new meaning for him. Verily he had become "the brother of the clod." Yet, while being conscious of this new oneness with all creation, Whitman never lost his feeling of individuality. The knowledge that love should be the law of life, that all men are his brothers, opened the poet's eyes to everything in nature. Each blade of grass, the weeds of the fields, the tiny ants crawling under the weeds, the mossy scales on the worm fence, and even the "heap'd stones,"7 each now took on new meanings in the poet's sight. His mysticism carried him to such heights that all creation teemed with greater meaning, with hitherto unnoticed significances. The world about the poet became his source-book. Man and nature were now the subjects for his poetic thought.

The elements furnished many symbols for Leaves of Grass. The sea, the earth, the sky, the clouds, the air, all became symbolic to the poet, but of all the elements, the sea intrigued his imagination most. From early childhood8 to old age,9 it was a source of inspiration to Whitman. Having been born almost in sight of the sea, it was his first and last love, so to speak. It is related that

7Ibid., Section 5, ll. 16-17.
9See "Passage to India," Section 9, ll. 25-31.
he caught the cold from which he finally died by stopping too long in winter to watch a sunset over the sea.\textsuperscript{10} All his biographers speak of the poet's love of the sea. He loved to read poetry by the sea because "the rhythm of the waves satisfied the rhythmic needs of his mind," and when he swam in the sea, he felt that "it embraced him with a lover's passion."\textsuperscript{11} Holloway says that Whitman got the greatest delight from sea-bathing because the poet of nature might hug her to his bosom with more tangible satisfaction than the eye could know in caressing the sunset, or the cheek when bared to the salutation of the breeze."\textsuperscript{12} The sea called to Whitman just as a lover beckons the beloved. He felt that it was a live thing with personality. He says:

\begin{quote}
You sea! I resign myself to you also -- I guess what you mean, 
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers, 
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me, 
\ldots
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse, 
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10}Ronald D. Sawyer, \textit{Walt Whitman, the Prophet-Poet}, p. 65.

\textsuperscript{11}H. B. Binns, \textit{A Life of Walt Whitman}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{12}Emory Holloway, \textit{Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative}, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{13}"Song of Myself," Section 22, ll. 1-3, 5-6.
We know that the poet read the classics near the seashore because the environment seemed to put him in the mood to appreciate the masterpieces of literature. Whitman has recorded that even as a boy he wanted to write a poem about the seashore -- "that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid, marrying the liquid," but as he grew older, deciding that the subject was too big for formal handling, he treated it only as "an invisible influence, a pervading gauge, a tally for his composition." "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is a poem in which the poet uses the sea as an element to "tally" his thought. Here the ceaseless waves give reply to the bereaved heart that death is the answer to the mystery of life.

The sea had many meanings to the poet. He looked on it as a symbol of the spiritual, the creative. In his imagination, the surge of the sea upon the seashore was symbolic of procreation. The elements had personality to Whitman. Notice how in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" he calls Faumanok, the land, his "father," and the fierce old sea, his "mother." The sea was a symbol of unity to the poet. The individual wave represented the soul of man, but as each wave lapsed back into the ocean, the universal, and became a part of the whole, just so man's soul is lost in

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14Holloway, op. cit., p. 102.
15Masters, op. cit., p. 83.
its union with the universal soul. "With Husky-Haughty Lips O Sea!" suggests the blending of the poet's own particular soul with the universal soul. The poem is an excellent example of unity. Man's soul, the particular, lapses into the sea, the universal, and is as completely at one with it as is the "wave that sinks on ocean's breast." They are as friends united, and the sea, "muttering from its deepest soul," tells the wave, "a kindred soul," "the tale of cosmic elemental passion." The sea was the symbol of eternity to Whitman, for who can say where it begins or where it ends? These lines carry this suggestion:

Now finalé to the shore
Now life and land farewell
......................................
Depart upon thy endless cruise old Sailor. 16

The sea was the symbol of immortality to the poet because of its mystery, its ceaseless ebb and flow, its agelessness. The sea often symbolizes the universal in Leaves of Grass. See how the poet expresses this idea in "Cut of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd." The "drop" that comes from the "rolling ocean," or the sea of life, is the love of one certain woman for the poet. Because their love can not come to fruition, each individual is to return to "the ocean," or go back to life, solaced by the fact that they are united in thought though separated in space.

16 "Now Finalé to the Shore."
It does not require a vivid imagination to endow the earth with feminine qualities. Poets have done this so frequently that the phrase "mother earth" is trite indeed. Whitman uses the earth as a symbol in this sense. In "A Song of the Rolling Earth," the poet uses the earth to represent the teeming mother of men and all created things. He uses the terms "earth" and "nature" as synonyms for productivity. He says that the "words," that is, the laws, of the earth never fail her "children," the races of the earth. He pictures nature or "the eloquent dumb great mother,"\(^{17}\) as holding the mirror of life before each of us, her children. The person who has obeyed the laws of nature sees things as perfect and complete in life's mirror, while the transgressor sees only the broken and the incomplete reflected to him.\(^{18}\) When the poet made his list of key-words or "earth's words," he placed "ground" and "soil" among them. They are synonyms for the earth in the sense of being productive elements. The earth or the land is naturally the emblem for productivity, hence feminine in nature. Water, to Whitman, was often the sign for the inceptive force of nature, hence masculine in character. Whitman sometimes reverses his imagery. In one poem often quoted,

\(^{17}\)"Song of the Rolling Earth," Section 1, ll. 47-52.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., Section 3, ll. 1-2.
he calls the land his "father,"\textsuperscript{19} and the sea "the fierce old mother."\textsuperscript{20} Whitman never minded contradicting himself.\textsuperscript{21} Whitman was a most frequent user of sex imagery. Notice these intense lines wherein the poet becomes the lover of the elements:

I call to the earth and the sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night -- press close magnetic nourishing night!
Night of south winds -- night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night -- mad naked summer night.\textsuperscript{22}

He felt that there was always the "procreant urge of the world," and quite frequently uses the starkest sex imagery. In some instances his plainness is offensive, but in other instances he expresses his ideas with more delicacy. The idea that the dawn is the child of the earth and the sky is expressed in these appropriate lines:

The earth by the sky staid with, the daily close of their junction,
The heav'd challenge from the east that moment over my head.\textsuperscript{23}

The air\textsuperscript{24} was another element always suggestive to Whitman's senses. One reason for this is that the air is enfolding, embracing in its nature, and we have Whitman's

\textsuperscript{19}"As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," Section 3, ll. 6, 11, 14.
\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., Section 1, l. 5.
\textsuperscript{21}"Song of Myself," Section 51, ll. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., Section 21, ll. 13-16.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., Section 24, ll. 61-62.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., Section 17, l. 6. See also "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd," and "To the Sun-set Breeze."
own testimony that he was especially susceptible to sensations received through the sense of touch. He says:

Is this then a touch? Quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush to my veins
You villain touch! What are you doing? My breath is tight in its throat,
Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.25

The poet in "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" told his love that every day at sundown he would "salute the air for her dear sake." The writer takes it to mean that she was to feel his love caressing her even as the surrounding air enfolded her.

Clouds were symbols from nature which Whitman liked to use. The obscuring nature of a cloud lends itself nicely to poetic usages. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the cloud that obscured the star became a premonition that evil was lurking near. The cloud, "the black murk," which came from "the moody, tearful night," obscured the "powerful western orb" and troubled the poet's soul. Finally, as the star26 dropped low in the sky, it was blotted out by the cloud, "was lost in the netherward black of the night," and the poet's heart was heavy, for the sense of impending ill overwhelmed him. The cloud became a symbol for the pall of

26"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Section 2, l. 3.
sorrow which settled over the poet when the star was
blotted from his sight by the "harsh surrounding cloud."
Clouds as elements that shut out the "stars," symbols for
man's higher aspirations, are effectively used in "On the
Beach at Night." The poet tells the child not to weep be-
cause "ravening clouds, burial clouds," "victorious soon
will devour the stars." The stars will finally emerge from
the obscuring clouds. Just as stars are immortal, and
eventually will rise from the darkening clouds, so the
soul of man, after "many burials, many days and nights
passing away," shall endure even longer than "lustrous
Jupiter," longer than the sun, or "the radiant Pleiades."

Whitman, true to his intention not to use conventional
subject matter, went to the real world of men, animals,
plants, and things for subjects for his poetry. The whole
world seemed alive with suggestive symbols to his sensi-
tized mind. In his prose, he expresses his interest in
creation in these words:

Love the earth and the sun and the animals, despise
riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up
for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and
labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning
God . . . take off your hat to nothing known or un-
known . . . go freely with powerful uneducated per-
sons . . . examine all you have been told -- church
or school . . . dismiss whatever insults your own
soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem . . .

27"Preface to Leaves of Grass," 1855 edition, In-
Neither "Knighthood's dauntless deed nor beauty's matchless eye" inspired Whitman. His inspiration came from nature, man, and the common things of life around him. Persons used as subjects in *Leaves of Grass* are few and far between, but they are significant. In a way, there has never been a stranger book written than *Leaves of Grass*. It has no hero, no heroine, no tales of stirring adventure or high romance, yet it bids fair -- when man has developed further -- to become one of the world's great books,²⁸ because Whitman meant his poetry to be the sign-manual of fraternity. Proper names are extremely scarce in his poetry, and even then, they are employed more as symbols than as the names of individuals. Among the list of most valuable symbolic proper names these appear: Adam and Eve, Columbus, Washington, Walt Whitman, and the old sailor, Kossabone.

While a few other proper names are mentioned, they are not important figures in his poems, and are used in a symbolic rather than a personal sense. There are those who think the poet egotistic to use his own name as frequently as Whitman has in his poems. He realized this, for he said:

> I know perfectly well my own egotism,
> Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,
> And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.²⁹

²⁹"Song of Myself," Section 42, ll. 30-32.
It was the poet's effort to bring all men "flush with himself," that is, to share his experiences with mankind, that made him use himself as "guide, philosopher, and friend" to all. It was not egotism, but the artless insouciance of the inspired that made him announce himself as America's leader in these seemingly egotistic lines:

Fall in behind me States!
A man before all -- myself, typical
before all. 30

In "Salut au Monde!" the poet again assumes the office of interpreter to the race. The poem opens with Whitman and a questioner viewing the world through the poet's eyes. The questioner asks the poet to explain the world to him:

What do you hear Walt Whitman? 31
....
What do you see Walt Whitman? 32

But the poet quickly forgets the questioner, and, as a prophet or seer, he views all the continents, their peoples, their works, and their cities, which he salutes in America's name. If new readers of Leaves of Grass will notice that the poet uses himself as a race-type rather than as an individual, and learn to distinguish between the poet's symbolical "I" and his individual "I," much misunderstanding of his poetry will be avoided. For example, the bewilderment

30 "By Blue Ontario's Shore," Section 14, ll. 1-2.
31 "Salut au Monde!" Section 3, ll. 1.
32 Ibid., Section 4, ll. 1.
often caused from reading "A Woman Waits for Me" will disappear if we remember that the poet is using the symbolical "I" in such lines as:

Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
I will go and stay with her who waits for me, and with those women that are warm-blooded and sufficient for me,
I see that they understand me and do not deny me,
I see that they are worthy of me, I will be the robust husband of those women.33

When the reader understands that the "I" of these lines refers to the inspirational powers of Leaves of Grass and not to Whitman as a man, a common misapprehension of the lines will be avoided. The frequent mention the poet makes of himself shows that Whitman remained true to his early intent of setting forth "a Person -- a human being --"34 himself, in his poetry.

The names of our first parents appear in Leaves of Grass, but not as persons with human traits as Milton pictured them in Paradise Lost. Their names are used in the generic sense only. They are the symbols of the "opposite equals" necessary in the procreative plan. Eve has the proud distinction of being the only woman mentioned by name

33"A Woman Waits for Me."

in *Leaves of Grass*, with the exception of the incidental mention of Jenny, old Kossabone's granddaughter. Eve is not mentioned as a person, but simply as a symbol of one of the equal forces needed for procreation. She is mentioned twice. The first time we find her in a poem of the "Children of Adam" series. The reincarnated Adam, denoted by the "I" of the poem, says:

> Existing I peer and penetrate still,  
> Content with the present, content with the past,  
> By my side or back of me Eve following,  
> Or in front, and I following her just the same.

Later she is mentioned in Whitman's most ambitious poem. The name of Adam himself is found in the last poem in the series relative to love between the sexes. The name is used symbolically and refers not to the first man as a person, but to Adam as a symbol of the poet's creative powers.

From the long list of great personages of the past, Whitman chose Columbus only as being worthy of a place in *Leaves of Grass*. Other poets have seen his possibilities, but it remained for Whitman to eulogize "the Genoese" with heart-felt ardor. The poet saw many parallels between himself and Columbus. He loved to identify himself with the buffeted discoverer as another "batter'd, wreck'd old man."

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35 "To the Garden the World"; "Passage to India," Section 5, l. 9.

36 "As Adam Early in the Morning."
Just as Columbus had dared sail the uncharted seas of the world, so he, the poet, had dared launch on the uncharted seas of the mind, singing of the body and the soul, following his intuitions, no matter where they led. It has been said that the "Prayer of Columbus" is Whitman's spiritual autobiography. Anne Gilchrist, on reading the poem, wrote Whitman a note that must have pleased him greatly. She said in part:

... as I see him in your poem his figure merges into yours, brother of Columbus. Completer of his work, discoverer of the spiritual, the ideal America -- you too have sailed the stormy seas to your goal -- surrounded with mocking disbelievers -- you too have paid the price of health ... 37

It is fitting that the last poem Whitman wrote should be "A Thought of Columbus," 38 and is always to be placed, by his own orders, at the end of "Old Age Echoes," the end of Leaves of Grass. Columbus became one of the poet's most cherished symbols of daring, and also of the misunderstanding that is often the penalty of daring.

Whitman lived in a transition period of our history. He was born early enough to know aging heroes of the Revolution. It is reported that the child Whitman, in 1825, was picked up and kissed by Lafayette as Brooklyn turned out to greet our visiting ally. 39 We know that as a youth his

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37 Holloway, op. cit., p. 279.
39 Holloway, op. cit., p. 5.
mind was fired by tales of Revolutionary War bravery. Then, when he was about forty years of age, the Civil War, with its heart-breaking sorrow, yet finally glorious outcome, became the center about which the poet's life revolved. We can not go into this matter here, but we know that Whitman felt, with Lincoln and many others, that the Union must be preserved at all costs. Lincoln's untimely death greatly shocked the poet. He has left the record of his grief in a group of poems known as "Memories of President Lincoln." In none of these poems is Lincoln's name mentioned. This fact gives the poems a more reverential air. Even in a poem written as late as 1888, in honor of Lincoln's birthday, Whitman did not call him by name. This has something of the air of the ancients who never referred to their gods by their real names lest they seem too familiar with divinity. Lincoln became for Whitman the symbol for the wise, beloved, and martyred leader; so, though he is not named directly in Leaves of Grass, he is a most important symbolical figure in its poems. Lincoln appealed to Whitman's imagination because he was physically, mentally, and spiritually a typical example of the "great uneducated person," the pioneer of our early history, who inspired Whitman to some of his best poetry.

40Ibid.
Whitman saw the sturdy men and women of pioneer days as one of America's greatest assets. He beheld the pioneers as symbols for the strength, truth, and justice he hoped the great American democracy would finally exemplify to the world. He felt the pioneers would take up the burden where "the elder races had halted," and in the New World would build a democracy suitable for the world to pattern after. He says of these "western youths," these men of action:

... we can not tarry here
We must march ... We must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend.

Have the elder races halted?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! 0 pioneers!41

The old sailor, Kossabone, "far back, related on my mother's side," is another of the very few persons named in Leaves of Grass. It is no odd coincidence that another sailor, along with Columbus, gained mention in Whitman's poems. Sailors and ships, anything that had to do with the sea, delighted Whitman as nothing else could do. The rugged old Dutchman of ninety, sitting watching the sea, tended by his grandchild, Jenny, became a symbol to the poet of all intrepid adventurers, including Columbus and the poet

41"Pioneers! 0 Pioneers!"
himself, who, respectively, had sailed seas material and immaterial in their quests. In "Old Salt Kossabone" the poet pictures any aged sailor watching a ship struggling to cross the bar, hoping that the next tide will kindly lift both him and the ship over the reefs and set them free on their destinations -- the open sea for the ship, the realms of the soul for the sailor.

The writer will not dwell very long on the symbols Whitman found in such objects as trees, grass, and flowers, for they are the stock in trade of conventional poets. Many of them have told us that "the groves were God's first temples," have been fascinated by the mystery of "the forest primeval," and have declared that "only God can make a tree." Whitman, too, saw trees as poetic symbols. His approach to things in nature was, as a rule, real and personal. He never gushed over nature. He felt it a part of his being. When he visioned a giant redwood tree about to fall, it became a symbol of something primarily as American as himself. He finds points of comparison between the dying redwood and his own departure from life. When he, the poet for America, falls, there will be another gap against the sky just as there was when the mighty redwood fell. In these solemn lines the poet voices the mighty tree's farewell:
Then the poet minglesthis own swan song with the tree’s farewell:

Nor yield we mournfully majestic brothers,
We who have grandly fill’d our time;
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
We welcome what we wrought for through the past,
And leave the field for them. 43

Holloway says that the poet, with dignified and appropriate symbolism, identifies himself with the mighty tree whose fall "will leave a lonesome place against the sky." 44 A live-oak tree, grown to majestic splendor in some rich field in Louisiana, became a symbol of manly love to the poet. He wondered how the tree in its solitary state could be so flourishing. He felt that the love of friends was the only thing that sustained him, and wondered how the tree could go on always "uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend or lover near." 45

In discussing the general title for Whitman’s poems, we have seen how grass became a symbol of manifold implications for the poet. Whitman saw grass as a symbol of the earth’s ceaseless reproductiveness, a symbol of nature’s

42 "Song of the Redwood-Tree," Section 1, ll. 6-8.
43 Ibid., ll. 33-34, 36-37.
44 Holloway, op. cit., p. 278.
45 "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing."
impartiality, as grass grows for all. It was a symbol, in its blades or leaves, of the particular, and, in its aggregate, of the universal.

Whitman used flowers poetically much as other writers have. The delicate, perfumed clusters of lilac flowers with their heart-shaped, dark green leaves were one of the three symbols so beautifully used in his elegy to Lincoln. Whitman was keenly alive to all the beauties of nature. Any reader of "There Was a Child Went Forth" is bound to notice the poet’s responsiveness to the beauty found in growing things like the grass, red and white morning-glories, the early lilacs, the water-plants, sprouting grain, the early blades of corn, apple blossoms, wood-berries, and even the common weeds by the roadside. "Song of Myself" contains many references to the mystery and beauty of nature. The poet marvels that from decay could spring "roses sweet-scented and growing" and "the polish’d breasts of melons." He thinks that "a bean in its pod confounds the learning of all times." He says that a morning-glory at his window satisfies him more than the metaphysics of books. Whitman’s love of nature, his joy in the beauty of natural things, his mystical attitude

46 "Song of Myself," Section 49, ll. 7-8.
47 Ibid., Section 48, l. 6.
48 Ibid., Section 24, l. 53.
toward nature, is found in many of his poems. Many passages in "Song of Myself" illustrate Whitman's real love of nature. 49

After Whitman became the sensitized lover of all created things, animals came consciously into his notice. In "Song of Myself" he sees them as symbols of the calm acceptance of things. They do not sweat and whine about their condition, nor weep for their sins, nor argue about God, nor worry over property, nor bow down to each other. He thinks they are symbols of independence and peaceful contentment. It is to be remembered that Whitman was an evolutionist, and, in the animal world, he beheld lower forms of life from which he thought higher forms had evolved. His lines to the gigantic stallion 50 are an evidence of this belief. He thinks life processes have passed through one form of life to another and finally to man. This idea he expresses in this way:

And [I] am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,
And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,
But call anything back again when I desire it. 51

The poet finds in animals many excellent traits which people might well emulate. The whale which swims with her

49 Ibid., Section 31, ll. 1-7; Section 21, ll. 12-26; Section 33, ll. 1-67.

50 Ibid., Section 32, ll. 18-26.

51 Ibid., Section 31, ll. 9-11.
calf and never forsakes it, becomes a symbol for devotion. "And the look of the bay mare shames all silliness out of me," says the poet. What person's record for dignity is so excellent? The calm eyes of oxen "that rattle the chain in the leafy shade" tell the poet "more than all the print he had read in his life."\(^52\) Whitman, being an evolutionist, was constantly seeing certain relationships between man and animals. He says:

> So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
> They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.\(^53\)

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" gives us another instance where Whitman uses a conventional symbol. In this poem a spider becomes the symbol of the seeking soul.

Birds were used frequently as symbols in *Leaves of Grass*. The best-known instance is the shy hermit-thrush, the symbol for the singing soul of the poet in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." A bird singing in "Starting fro Faumanok" fires the poet's imagination to think that his songs might inspire singers to arise in America to sing of the future great democracy Whitman hoped the United States would become. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is one of Whitman's finest poems. It was written at the height of

\(^{52}\)Ibid., Section 13, ll. 11-12.

\(^{53}\)Ibid., Section 32, ll. 9-10.
his powers. The mocking-bird is the definite symbol around which this exceedingly beautiful poem was written. Holloway tells us the poem was founded on a real incident from the poet's early youth. He says:

The ballad recounts how the boy stole from his . . . home at night to listen to the mournful call of a mocking-bird by the sea, as it sat on a nest to which its mate would never return. But the bird evidently symbolizes the poet's own soul, learning in sorrow the sweet mystery of death and separation. It was never necessary for Whitman to resort to tales of adventure or romance. The world of nature furnished him with limitless symbols to develop themes for _Leaves of Grass_.

Whitman's mind was not limited to man and animate nature for symbolic ideas. Places and things also were suggestive to his poetic fancy. Paumanok, the Indian name for Long Island, his birth-place, became a symbol for inceptions, for origins. Therefore, when he wanted to name a poem which sets forth his own birth and breeding, his ideas of the body and the soul, the functions of a native poet, and also the greatness of religion, democracy, and love, what better name could he have chosen than "Starting from Paumanok"?

New York interested Whitman as the abode of the stage-drivers, the ferry-boat men, the street-car conductors, the "great uneducated persons," with whom he liked to talk and

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54Holloway, _op. cit._, p. 162.
be with in their daily occupations. It was also the place where his soul had been thrilled by Jenny Lind, and Bettini, and, best of all, Marietta Alboni. Hence, New York became the symbol for the great city, with its crowds of all kinds and classes of people. Whitman says in "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" that nature may keep "her sun, her woods, her fields of clover" and so on, if he may have the faces in the street -- the men, the women, the shows, sights, and sounds of the streets of Manhattan. He says that "Mannahatta," the original Indian name, became "the specific and perfect name for his ideal city" because he liked to think of New York as a distinctively American city, filled with his "friends and lovers," the best people in the world:

A million people -- manners free and superb . . . the most courageous and friendly young men, City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts! City nested in bays! my city!56

Whitman's trip to New Orleans, where he "imprinted his brain with the shows, architecture, and customs" of an entirely new environment, may have caused the South to become a symbol for the exuberance of the more tropical South as contrasted with the less fruitful North of his youth.57

55Binns, op. cit., pp. 85-86.
56"Mannahatta."
57See "O Magnet-South."
California assumed a symbolic value for Whitman. The human race had begun in India, and has traveled westward, until now from California's shores, the race looks across the Pacific to its original home. The circle seemed almost complete. Where would the race move forward to now? Perhaps California symbolized the race's problem of facing the future with its untold perplexities.

India was a most interesting symbol to Whitman as we have explained elsewhere. In the physical sense, India is the symbol for the riches men have striven for ages to gain. In a spiritual sense, it typifies the origin of man, religion, and mysticism. Whitman did not have to invent "island vales of Avalon" or Utopias for settings for his poetic thought. He found the countries and cities of the real world excellent backgrounds for his poetry.

There is still another phase of the actual world where Whitman found symbols for his poetry. Man, animals, plant-life, and places were not sufficient for him. He reached out into the world of inanimate things for further symbols for use in Leaves of Grass. We have seen how compost\textsuperscript{58} became the symbol for new life. If one delves into the matter, he will find that the poet, besides being "stucco'd with animals and birds," also had coal and hard rock in his being.\textsuperscript{59} He finds that "dung and dirt are more admirable

\textsuperscript{58}"This Compost."

\textsuperscript{59}"Song of Myself," Section 31. 1. 8.
than was dreamed,"60 and even "the heap'd stones"61 in the fence corner took on a new meaning for him after he had become a mystic. There was nothing in all creation too mean or too little to engage the poet's mind. He could truly say, "I am a part of all that I have met."

An everyday article as ordinary as a hat became to Whitman a symbol for independence in action and thought. It is said that Whitman once strode into a church without removing his large soft felt hat. The verger rudely knocked it off, whereupon Whitman twisted the hat into a flail, scourged the verger with it, and walked out!62 Is one to suppose that this incident made him later write: "I wear my hat as I please indoors or out"?63

Whitman tells us that Leaves of Grass was not a mere book. It was what he had meant it to be: the record of a personality. Had he not said that his purpose, "from first to last," was to "put a Person, a human being, himself, on record"?64 He felt that Leaves of Grass was really the symbol of himself when he said:

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60Ibid., Section 41, l. 29.
61Ibid., Section 5, l. 17.
62Binns, op. cit., p. 68.
63"Song of Myself," Section 20, l. 9.
Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man. 65

Ships and sailors were always extremely suggestive to
the poet. He pictures his book of poems as a ship in "The
Ship Starting." A ship becomes the symbol for the poet him-
self and also for his soul. In "The Dismantled Ship," the
wrecked hulk becomes a symbol of the poet in his helpless
old age. When he wished to write of the passing of his
soul from time to eternity, his soul seems to him like a
ship straining at her hawsers to be off from its long, long
anchorage. Just as the freed ship bounds joyfully into the
deep, so the poet feels his soul will launch joyously on the
sea of eternity. 66

Arvin thinks that Whitman's achievement in making man
and nature the chief subjects of Leaves of Grass is one of
the most important events in modern literary history. He
says:

In spite of its feeble stretches, Leaves of Grass is
richer than any comparable book in intimations of
what a purely natural, an exclusively earthly exis-
tence for human beings may become when the ghost
of the supernatural is finally laid. . . . Whitman
did more than all but a few other writers to demes-
ticate the modern sensibility in its natural setting.
He could do so because . . . he felt . . . no dis-
satisfaction with his own existence as a natural per-
son . . . because . . . he felt no superstitious fears
of the natural world about him . . . he delighted
without shame in the rank as well as in the exquisite

65 "So Long!"

66 See "Passage to India," Section 9, 11. 20-28; also
"Joy, Shipmate, Joy!"
functions of . . . the physical organism, and he approached external nature not as an enemy but as a lover. 67

Masters agrees with Arvin, for he says that Whitman had the right idea, namely, that poetry, "the written word," must come out of life -- not out of books or learning. "It must come out of the earth." 68

The writer has explained earlier in this discussion that Whitman, in his last poetic period, had become very dependent upon symbolism to express his mystical, philosophical ideas. Few are the persons who realize the valuable social concepts set forth in Leaves of Grass because its message to the world is frequently obscured by symbolisms which often conceal rather than reveal the poet's thoughts. The reader who learns to look for definite symbols will the more readily grasp the meaning of the poems. When the stumbling-block of symbolism has been surmounted, the reader will be in a better position to comprehend Whitman's philosophy of life, death, and immortality.

Because the love poems are often misunderstood unless many of them are interpreted through their symbols, they should be carefully studied as important phases of Whitman's poetry. Therefore, the next chapter deals with symbolism in "Children of Adam" and "Calamus," the poems, respectively, of sexual and spiritual love.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOVE POEMS

A study of symbolism in *Leaves of Grass* demands that special notice be given to the groups commonly called the love poems, composed of the two sections, called respectively "Children of Adam" and "Calamus." Because the first group of poems could never have been written by one with only hearsay knowledge of sexual love, it is necessary for us to examine the background from which the poet's knowledge sprang. Even the casual reader of "Children of Adam" perceives that Whitman was no novice in sex matters, although the records show that the poet was never married. As the love poems have aroused so much comment, much of it greatly derogatory to Whitman, and are unusual in their conception, we are, perforce, bound to examine the phase of Whitman's life which is the background so vividly reflected in the "Children of Adam" group. The poet's chief modern biographers agree that between the years 1837 and 1848, the future poet of *Leaves of Grass* had ample opportunity to sound all life's experiences. Binns, Bragelotte, and Holloway think that the evidence points to New Orleans as the
place where the poet had a brief but intense love affair, which profoundly affected him as a man and as a poet. Whitman was never definite about this phase of his life, and it is doubtful if all the facts concerning it will ever be known. Untiring searchers for the truth of the matter have been able to find out very little more than Whitman chose to reveal. Those who wish to read the story, as pieced together from the known meager facts and conjectures, will find Holloway's account, perhaps, the most satisfactory and complete. The important fact for us, in the present discussion, is to establish the fact that the poet, though unmarried, was no stranger to sexual love. Although the poet's love knowledge was derived "without benefit of clergy," his fidelity to his one great passion should redeem it, to a great extent, from censorious comment. John Burroughs, who knew Whitman most intimately, admits that the poet had ample opportunity "to sound all of life's experiences." Because the poet's later life is entirely blameless as far as his relations with women went, may we not draw the mantle of charity over a young man's first love, and agree with Burroughs that Whitman's love life was "chaste, though unconventional"?

It is evident that "Children of Adam" sprang from emotional depths that revealed the poet to himself, and showed

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1 Emory Holloway, Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative, pp. 65-71.
him his kinship with other men. The fact that Whitman's experiences were unhallowed by wedlock may account for some of the grating coarseness and shocking lack of reticence found in certain of the "Children of Adam" poems.

Many critics think Whitman's love poems lack tenderness and beauty because they reflect no emotions from courtship and marriage. Holloway says:

We can never know what were the barriers to Whitman's ever marrying. Surely he could have found more than one woman who was willing. Indeed, . . . one of the finest of women let him know as much. . . . When he chose to give his questioners on the point any answer, it was that he was inordinately jealous of his own freedom. . . . Had he married a woman fit to match his high spirit . . . he might have had to learn adaptability, might even have had to restrain his muse somewhat; but would he not have learned also to speak with more authority on all those themes that were dearest to his pen?2

De Selincourt also feels that had Whitman known the high type of love inherent in true marriage, he surely would have been more restrained and delicate in his poems relative to love between the sexes. He expresses his ideas in these words:

... while his theories point ... to marriage as the consummation of sexual life, he lacked the slowly accumulating experiences, the disciplines, and revelations of which normal marriage is the vehicle. . . .

Perhaps, had the poet married, "Children of Adam" might not

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2Ibid., p. 171.

3Basil De Selincourt, Walt Whitman, p. 195.
have been so starkly presented, but then the poems might also have lost some of the originality and vigor which give them their zest. Whitman had the feeling that marriage might "clip the wings of his muse," for he told Bucke, his friend and first biographer, that he had not married because he feared ties that might bind him. The poet was true to his first love and to his poetic muse, for he neither sought marriage nor accepted it when proffered by the brilliant, kindly, and socially desirable Anne Gilchrist. The story of their remarkable friendship is too well known to need recounting here. Whitman's conduct in this case was dignity and kindliness itself. He proved to be one of those rare men who have been able to turn a woman's unsought love into true friendship. His irreproachable conduct in his relations with Mrs. Gilchrist should help prove that Whitman was not a man of licentious instincts as some readers think the "Children of Adam" group indicates. Those who realize his truly affectionate nature wonder that Whitman never married. He had his compensations, in early life, in his love for his family. Later on, his work and a large circle of friends of both sexes occupied all his time; but, in his old age, the poet himself said perhaps it would have been better for him had he married.  

The story of Whitman's love-life shows that while his

4Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman, p. 270.
knowledge of romantic love was derived from intense experiences, it was, because of its very nature, meager and unsatisfying. As far as we can judge, he knew nothing of the tender sentiments which arise from the true union of minds and hearts. Because his own love experiences were unusual, it is but natural that from such a background only unusual love poetry could be produced. Readers nurtured upon romantic love as recorded by Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Poe, and Longfellow can hardly recognize "Children of Adam" as love poems.

Whitman never denied that in New Orleans he had sounded the depths of romantic love. We know that there was at least one other woman to whom he was deeply attached, but circumstances beyond his control prevented their marriage. "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" is a love poem supposedly indited to her. At any rate, we know that the poet, instead of being only a bystander in the game of life, had become a full participant in the mysteries of passionate love. Such poems as "One Hour to Madness and Joy," "Native Moments," and "Spontaneous Me" are vivid reflections from the poet's discovery of sexual love. With the ardor of a convert, Whitman sings of sexual love in a manner too un-restrained and free to be pleasing to the average English temperament.

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5 Floyd Stovall, editor, Walt Whitman, Representative Selections, note, p. 409.
Now that we know that the poet was no stranger to romantic love, let us see what ideas he had accumulated concerning woman. Just as Whitman's knowledge of love between the sexes had come through unusual channels, one finds that his ideas in regard to woman were also not those of the conventional poet. The personal aspects of beauty, and mental attributes, such as devotion, fidelity, patience, and all other truly feminine traits which have inspired other poets, were as nothing to Whitman in his love poems. The only woman mentioned in "Children of Adam" is Eve, and there she is devoid of personality. She is simply the symbol for the female of the species. Whitman entirely overlooks woman as having any quality other than that of fecundity. Other poets have taken this fact for granted, and praise woman as man's inspiration and comforter. This lack of sentiment makes "Children of Adam" bleak and bare when compared with the more conventional type of love poetry. While Longfellow knew that men and women are equally needed in the biological scheme, he also gives them credit for being something more than merely male and female creatures. He expresses their spiritual interdependence, a fact Whitman too often ignores. Whitman seems to think that being man's "equal opposite" is honor enough for woman. Women know their relative importance in the continuance of the race, and would much rather be praised in such lines as these trite but pleasing ones.
of Longfellow's:

As unto the bow the cord is,
So unto the man is woman,
Though she bends him, she obeys him,
Though she draws him, yet she follows,
Useless each without the other!

Whitman but rarely notices woman's mental attributes and spiritual influences. This lack of insight caused Noyes to remark that Whitman saw woman as "a type, an instrument." He thinks the poet makes "too much of the great things in woman's life and not enough of the little."\(^6\) The poet too often sees woman as a female being only. Whitman's conception of woman as the equal of man perhaps so elevated her in his thinking that he failed to realize that woman needs to be wooed before marriage, and tenderly cherished afterwards. With greatest reverence, the poet salutes womankind and says:

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.\(^7\)

He feels woman should exult in her natural functions, for he says:


\(^7\) "Song of Myself," Section 21, ll. 4, 6.
Be not ashamed, women, your privilege
encloses the rest, and is the
exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body and you
are the gates of the soul. 8

Whitman never masks nature's purpose with any romantic screening. Woman's ultimate goal of motherhood is her reason for being.

The poet of "Children of Adam" sees woman in the abstract. He never sees a particular woman, an individual. There can be nothing more distasteful to woman than to be viewed en masse. Noyes aptly sums Whitman's attitude for us in these words:

With Whitman, the love of man for woman is a comparatively simple matter. He does not trouble himself with its psychology, all its infinite subtilties and shades. He takes it quite innocently and frankly as nature intends it, as the means of fulfilling her ultimate design. Whitman ... is not a woman's poet. The glory of motherhood he celebrates with a divine enthusiasm. ... But ... in the lesser relations of life, she does not enter into his scheme. 9

Whitman stresses the physical equality of the sexes, and largely ignores the higher phases of companionship which have spiritualized the love poems of the more romantic poets. He thinks primarily of men and woman as they are endowed to reproduce the race, and frequently praises the body in lines of which these are typical:

8"I Sing the Body Electric," Section 5, ll. 15-16.
9Noyes, op. cit., p. 123.
The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account,
That of the male is perfect, that of the female is perfect. 10

Many readers have objected to the "Children of Adam" series because the poems speak so very plainly of sexual love. Even Mrs. Gilchrist, Whitman's most ardent admirer, deplored his lack of delicacy, for she wrote thus to William Rossetti, when he offered to send her Whitman's unexpurgated works:

I shall quite fearlessly accept your kind offer of the loan of a complete edition . . . certain that a great and divinely beautiful nature has not, could not infuse any poison into the wine he has poured for us. And as for what you specially allude to, who so able to bear it as . . . one who has learned to accept all things with tenderness, to feel the sacredness in all? Perhaps Walt Whitman has forgotten . . . the truth that our instincts are beautiful facts of nature, as well as our bodies; and that we have a strong instinct of silence about some things. 11

The age in which he was reared also helped give Whitman his matter-of-fact and unromantic attitude towards woman. The pioneer woman who survived was the one who was able to withstand the hardships of frontier life. She worked at almost every task her husband undertook, and was truly his equal and helpmate. The poet's knowledge of woman, springing from pioneer times and from his own unconventional experiences in love, combined to give him anything but a

10 "I Sing the Body Electric," Section 2, ll. 1-2.
11 Holloway, op. cit., p. 258.
conventional romantic background for his love poems. It is any wonder, then, that many readers fail to recognize some of the "Children of Adam" series as love poems?

Whitman meant to express his ideas of sexual love as plainly and as forcibly as possible. He knew that his frankness was annoying to many, but he had a definite purpose in writing so plainly of romantic love. He had become the poet of revolt. He wished to free the body and sex from the taint which Judaism, Christianity, and Puritanism had declared inherent in them since the fall of our first parents. He refused to think of the soul as good and the body as evil. In his prose the poet is reported to have said that he had but "one final test for civilization -- the capacity of producing, favoring, and maintaining a fine crop of children -- a magnificent race of men and women."\(^{12}\)

With this as the goal of the race, Whitman was bound to celebrate love between men and women with vigor and frankness. While his approach to sexual love often offends one's artistic taste, it should not shock our moral nature. If life is holy, then sex, its source, is of the same nature.

Symonds expressed this idea well when he said:

Much in Whitman puzzled me and repelled me. But it was the aesthetic, not the moral, sensibility that suffered; for I felt . . . his method of treating sexual things (the stumbling block to beginners) was the right one.\(^{13}\)

\(^{12}\)Edgar Lee Masters, Walt Whitman, p. 105.

\(^{13}\)J. A. Symonds, Walt Whitman: A Study, p. 158.
Masters reports that Whitman once said that we had gotten so in our civilization that we "were afraid of the body and its issues," that we shrank from the realities of our bodily life, and refer to the functions of men and women, their sex, their passion, their normal necessary desires as things "to be kept in the dark and suppressed instead of being brought to the light and gloried in." Masters thinks Whitman the most influential poet of protest against the evil idea that the body or any of its functions could be vile. Masters tells us that Whitman was a great influence in bringing about the better respect for the body which we know today. He says the poet stood for sanity in matters of sex and for the outspoken championship of "sexual delight as one of the blessings of human life." He spoke "for sensuality," not for "wayward indulgences," "for man's and woman's spirit playing through the body, and thereby ministering to the spirit and finding itself."

Holloway says that Whitman in deciding to let his sex poems stand as he had written them, "appealed to the future," and that, in part, the future has agreed with him "that the America of 1860 was too prudish," that a frank and natural treatment of sex is more desirable than "a furtive and suggestive one."

\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\text{Masters, op. cit., p. 101.} \] \[\text{\textsuperscript{15}}\text{Tbid., p. 323.} \] \[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\text{Holloway, op. cit., p. 167.} \]
Whitman was from the first publication of "Children of Adam" never in doubt as to the fact that sentiments and sex imagery in the love poems might be misunderstood. Emerson warned him that his treatment of sex would be offensive to the general reading public, but, while Whitman understood the points that Emerson made, he was entirely unwilling to change his lines or delete the offending poems.

Whitman, being the avowed poet of the body, was prepared to sing of it from top to toe, with nothing omitted:

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,
I say the form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.  

Knowing many of his ideas were too advanced for his own times, Whitman said some of his poems were "candidates for the future." He hoped later generations would gain a better knowledge of what his poetry meant. He believed so firmly that the future would give him a better understanding that he said:

I am willing to wait to be understood by the growth of the taste of myself.

Fortunately, Whitman lived long enough to realize that there had been a great growth in the "taste of himself."

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18"One's-Self I Sing."

19"By Blue Ontario's Shore," Section 14, l. 16.
Let us examine some of the symbols from which the "Children of Adam" group was evolved. Adam and Eve, the symbols of procreation, are found in the opening poem of the group.\textsuperscript{20} From Whitman's viewpoint, the whole human body is naturally an important symbol in the love poems. While other poets have used certain parts of the body, as blue eyes, ruby lips, and golden hair as symbols in love poems, Whitman scorns the mere aspects of bodily beauty and takes all parts of the body\textsuperscript{21} as symbols in his love poems. This is not only inartistic, but seems coarse and indelicate to most readers of Leaves of Grass. Another effective symbol is woman herself.\textsuperscript{22} A drop of ocean water,\textsuperscript{23} the whole ocean, and the air are useful symbols for Whitman. Man's reproductive powers the poet symbolizes as "pent-up aching rivers,"\textsuperscript{24} which he, the poet, "determin'd to make illustrious," although he should stand alone in his effort to do so. The new garden\textsuperscript{25} becomes a symbol for America, and California's shores\textsuperscript{26} the symbol for man's westward progress around the globe. The poet himself becomes a symbol for

\textsuperscript{20}"To the Garden the World."

\textsuperscript{21}"I Sing the Body Electric," all of Section 9.

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, all of Section 5.

\textsuperscript{23}"Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd."

\textsuperscript{24}"From Pent-up Aching Rivers."

\textsuperscript{25}"To the Garden the World."

\textsuperscript{26}"Facing West from California's Shores."
mankind in various poems. The average reader, looking for symbols of love, would hardly find romantic interest in such terms as "the body electric," "a drop of water," a "new garden," or "the Chanter of Adamic songs," yet Whitman uses them all as symbols in his poems of romantic love.

When individual poems are examined, one finds that Whitman cleverly used these seemingly unromantic symbols to express his ideas of sexual love. His choice of "Children of Adam" as the title for the section of the love poems dealing with sexual love is especially apt, as has been explained in a previous chapter. The poem, "To the Garden the World," introduces the "Children of Adam" series. It is built around two very potent symbols for creative power: Adam and Eve. The poet represents himself as the reincarnated Adam come to restore sex to the status of dignity it enjoyed in the time of man's innocency. The "garden," to which the poet is followed by his mate or poetic genius, Eve, is the new world of America. The poems that result from their union are aptly called "Children of Adam." Symbolism derived from such obvious symbols as Adam and Eve is easily grasped. Therefore, they are two of his most valuable symbols.

The casual reader will look upon "I Sing the Body Electric" as a song of the body only until he finds the thought

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27 See "Song of Myself," "Spontaneous Me," and "Native Moments."
conveyed by the symbols. The human body is certainly the very definite symbol around which the poem is woven, but the true significance of the poem is in its symbolic implications. Interpreted literally, the poem is revolting in its enumeration of the bodily parts and functions. When the figurative meaning is perceived, one realizes that through the "electric" or sensitive bodies of men and women, plays the divine fire of creative energy which is certainly a God-given force. Whitman sought in writing this poem to make the body the respected symbol for the physical rites of sexual love. Knowing the interaction of spirit upon matter, is the poet wrong when, in conclusion, he says:

O I say these are not the parts and the poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul! 28

The spiritual element in procreation was an idea early fixed in Whitman's mind. Holloway cites us to a poem largely impregnated with this idea before "Children of Adam" was written. This poem is replete with sex imagery and the idea that the creative powers are spiritual forces in nature. This idea is more fully developed in "A Woman Waits for Me." Because the symbolism of the poem is often not understood, it has been one of the poems which caused Whitman to be denounced as "vilely lustful." It seems odd that in this poem,

28 "I Sing the Body Electric," Section 9, ll. 35-36.
written in Mid-Victorian times, Whitman should have pictured so accurately the bronzed, athletic, capable woman of the present day. The only explanation for this fact is that the poet's ideas were often a hundred years ahead of his time. "A Woman Waits for Me" is an outstanding example of symbolism from its title to the last line. The "woman" of the poem is no particular woman. She is the symbol of woman-kind. The "me" of the poem refers not to Whitman, the man, but to his poetic powers. The poet says this ideal woman "waits for him"; that is, he hopes that the ideal symbolic woman of whom he sings will be inspired by his poetry, and from her normal mating will produce the healthy and intelligent offspring needed to make America the great democracy of the future. Unless the symbolic nature of this poem is understood, many of its lines are shocking indeed. A literal interpretation of "A Woman Waits for Me" is utterly foolish; but when it is interpreted through its symbols: the ideal woman and the great or creative poet, it becomes a most striking example of the power of visible symbols to express the intangible.

Many readers complain that "Children of Adam" is characterized by an overwrought vein of sexuality. Such readers should carefully read "I Hear You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ" and "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd." Whitman, in these poems, shows that sex love can be an intellectual
and spiritual influence. The latter poem is rich in symbols. A "drop" from the ocean becomes the symbol for a certain woman whom the poet loved. She advances to him from "the ocean," a symbol for the mass of humanity. They are mutually attracted, but for reasons not stated, their love is of short duration. The union of their minds creates "a great ronduer," a symbol for unity which Whitman found effective. The lovers return to the "irresistible sea," a symbol for life, or the world. They are comforted by the fact that, though time and space may separate them for the rest of their lives, they are enfolded by the same enveloping atmosphere, frequently a symbol of love to the poet because of its embracing, caressing quality.

Without doubt, Whitman in his zeal to restore sex love to its proper status as a theme for poetry, wrote some poems which are offensive to people of fastidious sentiments. "One Hour to Madness and Joy" and "Spontaneous Me," combined with "Native Moments," compose a trio which was not indited for boys and girls, but for adults who realize that the poet meant to elevate and praise passionate love as man's boon and blessing. These poems must be interpreted figuratively. When reading the trio mentioned, one is to remember that symbolism "employs imagery and fancy" in its efforts to portray the invisible and the intangible.

29"Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd." See also "Passage to India," Section 4, ll. 12-13.
"Spontaneous Me" needs some explanation. The pronoun of the title is another use of Whitman's symbolic pronoun, standing for the poet as the archetypal man. The poet asserts his kinship with mankind in "Spontaneous Me." He makes himself the symbol for man exulting in his natural or "spontaneous" procreative powers.

In "Native Moments" the poet also envisions himself as the symbol for humanity. Discovering that he is a kinsman of even the lowest of his fellows, the poet exclaims:

0 you abunn'd persons, I at least do not shun you,
I will come forth in your midst, I will be your poet,
I will be more to you than to any of the rest.30

As the embodiment of understanding love, the poet recounts the story of true love lavished upon him by a woman scorned by the world. Because her love for him was pure, the poet absolves her from her unlovely past.31 The poet thus becomes the symbol of all-embracing love, a rôle he assumes in another poem32 which is often greatly misunderstood.

"Facing West from California's Shores" is a highly fanciful symbolic poem. One may ask why it is placed in

30"Native Moments."
31"Once I Pass'd through a Populous City."
32"To a Common Prostitute."
the love section as it makes no reference to sexual love. The fact that the sex instinct is the force that has kept mankind ever progressing, ever looking for a better place "in the sun" for his offspring, is the only reason for the inclusion of this poem in "Children of Adam." The "I" of the poem does not mean Whitman. It is the symbol for mankind. The poet knows that the race has ever traveled westward from its original home in the Garden of Eden. The ever-westward journey becomes the symbol of man's progress around the globe. The poet pictures the race as having reached the shores of California. From these shores mankind envisions, across the Pacific, his earliest home, "the house of maternity," India, the symbol for the birthplace of humanity. The almost-encircled globe symbolizes the fact that man has about completed his course. The poet pictures the race as "tireless, seeking what is yet unfound." This restlessness may be the urge of the creative force ever present in man, or it may typify man's unrewarded search around the globe for the perfect, the ideal. There is a haunting cry to the last lines of the poem:

But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it not yet found? 33

Whitman concludes his poems of love between the sexes with a poem called "As Adam Early in the Morning." Here

\[33\text{"Facing West from California's Shores."}\]
the poet, the symbol for the singer, hopes through his songs of sex to return man to a state of naturalness in sex matters. He urges mankind to hear his voice, to heed his teachings. He says:

Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,
Be not afraid of my body.

The poet uses the word "body" as a symbol for his works. We are not to be afraid of his works. We are told we "may touch our palms to his body." In other words, the "touching of palms" to the poet's "body" is a symbolic way for saying that good will come to us from close contact with the poet, just as touching a king in olden times was supposed to have curative powers.

Readers of Leaves of Grass who understand the symbolic nature of many of the love poems, like Thoreau, will regret not that the poems are too sensual, but will wish "that men and women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is, without misunderstanding them." 34

Many readers who understand Whitman's motives in writing "Children of Adam" have been baffled by the poems of spiritual love. Like "Children of Adam," the "Calamus" poems are much easier to comprehend when they are interpreted through their symbols.

"Calamus," the second division of the love poems,

34 Perry, op. cit., pp. 120-121.
springs from Whitman's remarkable genius for friendship. With him, comradeship was at once an ideal and a passion. Reserved and reticent in some matters, the poet attracted friends from all walks of life and from both sexes, although he was always more at home with men than with women. Noyes says that friendship satisfied the poet entirely, furnishing him "a happiness that was purely physical, it was so actual and immediate." 35 One is constrained to think com- radely love satisfied the poet's emotional needs, for we know he could have formed closer ties had he wished, a fact proved by Anne Gilchrist's love for Whitman.

Many readers think the "Children of Adam" series fails as a portrayal of romantic love because the poems were derived from a background of sexual frustration. Then "Calamus," derived from a background of varied, ample, and delightful friendships, should be entirely successful. Unfortunately, this is not the case. "Calamus" is as devoid of cheerful friendliness as "Children of Adam" is lacking in romantic interest. Whitman lacked something in his experiences which friends could not supply. "Calamus" is filled with an ever-seeking, jealous, furtive, and unsatisfied air of longing. This quality arises, perhaps, from the fact that Whitman had never experienced the truest forms of companionship: exalted love and the continuous love of wife

35 Noyes, op. cit., p. 127.
and child. He was not able to sublimate emotions arising even from friendship into the happy and satisfying sentiments which arise from true love and marriage. Whitman hoped to exalt comradely love as the highest emotion, but the average reader, because the poems are so highly symbolic and mysterious, fails to grasp the meaning of the "Calamus" series.

Whitman, in writing "Calamus," wished that his poems of spiritual love might bind America into an indissoluble continent.\textsuperscript{36} He felt that "Calamus" was a document of the highest social value,\textsuperscript{37} and ardently hoped that brotherly love might eventually become more important than laws or institutions. The fallacy arises from the fact that spiritual or brotherly love is the rarest of emotions. Mankind has long known instances of heroic love in the loves of David and Jonathan, of Damon and Pythias, of Achilles and Patroclus, yet the great mass of mankind knows nothing of such exalted, selfless love; therefore "Calamus" arouses very little response in the mind of the average reader.

Whitman felt that "Calamus" carried his most important message to the world. He hoped these poems of spiritual love would help usher in the brotherhood of man, long the poet's dream. "Calamus," to date, has failed in its mission

\textsuperscript{36} "For You O Democracy."

\textsuperscript{37} See "I Hear It Was Charged Against Me," and also "To the East and to the West."
for two reasons: the world as yet knows but little of spiritual love; and, secondly, Whitman has so involved the poems with obscuring symbolisms that his message is lost to the average reader. If "Children of Adam" offends by being too plain in regard to sexual love, then certainly "Calamus" offends by being too obscure in expounding spiritual love. Because the world so desperately needs to know more of true brotherly love, it is indeed unfortunate that Whitman couched his poems on the subject in symbolic utterances which are grasped only by students of his works. Just as "Children of Adam" argues for true, ardent love between the sexes, "Calamus" pleads for strong, true love between man and man.

In order that the reader may not think "Calamus" written for the masculine mind only, the writer refers him to "Among the Multitude" and to "Roots and Leaves Themselves Alone." While it is true that most of the "Calamus" poems are concerned with love between men, this fact should not be used to prove that the series refers to brotherly love only. De Selincourt expresses this idea more fully when he says:

Calamus is the celebration of the ideal relationship of soul to soul . . . in order to divest this relationship of sexual associations, Whitman confines his hymns of it to the love of one man for another. . . . It is equally, of course, the relation of woman to woman, or man to woman in the rare cases in which differences of sex become irrelevant.
Nor of course is it suspended in relations which are founded on sex. It is suspended only when sex perverts or prevents a relationship. 38

The individual can do but little to make men love his brother as he should, but he may examine the symbols found in "Calamus," and by explaining the thoughts entwined with them, help expound the poet's doctrine of spiritual love, "the dear love of man for his comrade," "the attraction of friend for friend." 39 Whitman's use of symbols in "Calamus" is indeed varied. He uses such diverse objects as the calamus plant, 40 his own breast, 41 his own swarthy face, 42 the drops of his heart's blood, 43 a passing stranger, 44 prairie-grass, 45 two inseparable youths, 46 untrodden paths by the pond's side, 47 a flame of fire, 48 and a sturdy oak tree 49 as symbols of spiritual love.

39 "The Base of All Metaphysics."
40 "These I Singing in Spring."
41 "Scented Herbage of My Breast."
42 "Behold This Swarthy Face."
43 "Trickle Drops."
44 "To a Stranger."
45 "The Prairie-Grass Dividing."
46 "We Two Boys Together Clinging."
47 "In Paths Untrodden."
48 "Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes."
49 "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing."
The use of definite symbols to express intangible ideas is extremely valuable in "Calamus." Just as Whitman wrote a keynote, symbolic poem for "Children of Adam," he introduces "Calamus" with a poem highly symbolic of "manly attachment," or spiritual love. Because love which has no ulterior motive is the least practiced form of love, and therefore the least understood, the poet feels he is venturing on "untrodden paths" when he essays to sing the true love of comrades. "In Paths Untrodden" introduces the "Calamus" series. "Untrodden paths" become the symbol around which the poet weaves his ideas of comradely love. He says that on these "untrodden paths" he will escape from "standards hitherto published," and by the "pond's side" walk the "untrodden paths" of comradely love. The pond's side becomes a symbol in more ways than one. Water was always a symbol of unity and immortality to the poet, so by the "pond's side," away from the "clank" or bustle of the world, the poet, unhampered by previous conformities, can tally his thoughts by the "tongues aromatic," the tall blades of calamus, nourished at the water's edge. In the seclusion of untrodden ways, the poet says he is "no longer abash'd," and will sing no songs but those of "manly attachment" for "all who are or have been young men."50

The poet points out the symbol for the series, the

50"In Paths Untrodden."
calamus plant, in the poem "These I Singing in Spring."
The calamus plant is a three-fold symbol. As the leaves vanish in the winter, they stand for the transient forms of life, but because they reappear in spring from the deeply-buried roots, the plant becomes a symbol for the unending cycle of life. The tall, sturdy leaves, growing in close-serried ranks, suggest the unity and nearness of true friendship, so Whitman was indeed fortunate when he selected the calamus plant as the symbol for his treasured songs of spiritual love. In the concluding lines of the poem he says:

And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades, this calamus-root shall,
Interchange it youths with each other! let none render it back!51

"Scented Herbage of My Breast" may be regarded as the epitome of the poet’s idea that spiritual love is the highest type of love. The poem contains his full exposition of the "dear love of comrades." The dominant symbols are the poet’s own "breast" or heart, the source of his poems of brotherly love, and "scented herbage," the symbol for the poems which are formed from his very heart’s blood, as it were, because his emotions concerning these poems are so intense. Just as all forms of herbage spring from the bosom of the earth, so do the poet’s songs spring from his heart.

51"These I Singing in Spring."
or "breast," thus becoming the "herbage of his breast."
The root from which the "herbage" or poems spring is
brotherly love, symbolized by the "blushing" or faintly-
pink calamus root. The blush of the root becomes the sym-
bol for the shyness of spiritual love which fears rejection.
Whitman is convinced that should his conception of com-
radely love be widely practiced, he could make "the most
splendid race the sun ever shone upon."52

Another symbolic poem necessary to the understanding
of "Calamus" is "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand."
Read by the uninitiated, this poem seems an invitation to a
furtive assignation. The pronoun "Me" of the title refers
to Whitman's works, and is a symbol for his works. The gist
of the poem is that unless you are willing to be guided by
his works and are able to understand them, you had better
let them alone, for a half knowledge of the poet's ideas
might not only be dangerous, but might, perhaps, be de-
structive. He says:

    But these leaves conning you can at peril,
        For these leaves and me you will not understand.53

Thus we see "leaves" become symbols for his poems and "me"
becomes the symbol for the body of his works. From this
illustration we learn that the person reading Leaves of

52 "For You O Democracy."

Grass must be able to interpret the symbols, for otherwise the poems are often meaningless.

Woman as the symbol for physical or sexual love, and man as the symbol for spiritual love are employed to produce the poem "Fast Anchor'd Eternal O Love!" It is a short but thorough exposition of the poet's idea that spiritual love transcends by far the love between the sexes, "resistless" as sexual love may be.

"Earth, My Likeness" is another poem which has been severely criticized because it hints of emotion so "fierce and terrible" that the poet says he "dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs." "An athlete," or a robust comrade, becomes the symbol which arouses in the poet's mind the most ardent sentiments. He is so entranced with his own emotions that he imagines his friend is inspired by an equally strong feeling. There is a tenseness and a fervid air about this poem more expressive of passionate love than of spiritual love. Whitman could have profited from David's calm description of the love "that passeth the love of woman."

Whitman was fearful that his readers would not understand the intense yet diffident emotions of spiritual love, and expresses the idea in a poem of three lines: "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me." The inner or more delicate leaves of the calamus plant become the symbol for the poems of
spiritual love. He calls them "the frailest leaves" because they are symbols of the most delicate of the emotions: selfless love. He has shielded them in his heart because he feared to express these ideas to an uncomprehending world. Whitman felt that "Calamus" was the heart of *Leaves of Grass* for he says of these poems:

Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them, And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.54

The instances of symbolism cited from "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" should prove, first, that symbols are invaluable to the poet in his efforts to convey intangible and philosophical ideas. Secondly, the reader must understand the symbolism of the poems, or the poet's efforts have been in vain.

Whitman regarded the love poems as perhaps the core of his philosophy. He was never willing for them to be changed, regardless of how adversely they might affect his fame and fortune. Even now, almost a hundred years after the first printing of *Leaves of Grass*, the poems are still often imperfectly interpreted, largely because their symbolism is not understood. As time has progressed, it has greatly vindicated Whitman's ideas about the body and sex, but his social concepts are still obscured from the many because of

54"Here the Frailest Leaves of Me."
the enshrouding symbolisms the poet employs as the medium for the expression of his mystical ideas. If, by any chance, the love poems should be entirely stricken from Whitman's works, he would still have a mass of poetry sufficient in quality and quantity to rank him with the world's great poets. In the concluding chapter, the writer will cite instances of symbolism from many other excellent but less controversial poems.
CHAPTER V

SYMBOLISM IN MISCELLANEOUS POEMS

Readers of Leaves of Grass who may have been shocked by the seeming animality of "Children of Adam," or dismayed by the sometimes frenzied emotions of "Calamus," may turn to other symbolic poems more characteristic of Whitman at his best. "Song of Myself" is a poem rich in symbols. It may be considered the keynote poem for his poetic works, for it contains, in germ, practically all his philosophical ideas, and is replete with symbolism expressed in some of his most excellent free verse. Here again, the poet sees himself as the symbol for the race. Through his own eyes he interprets the universe for us. Because currents from all nature flow through the poet's cosmic mind, he is able to understand all, to speak for all; hence his pronouncements concerning life and death, immortality and God. The symbolic Walt Whitman is in everything and a part of all creation. Therefore, he becomes an index for the soul of the race. His universality is complete: he sings for all. He knows neither race nor creed, good nor bad, victor nor vanquished. He understands and sympathizes with all creation. Animals, insects, plants, birds, and creatures of
the sea intrigue his poetic mind because, as an evolutionist, he sees in all lower forms proof that man has risen from them. Because of its metaphysical nature, "Song of Myself" can hardly be reduced to a prose narrative. It tells no continuous story, has no thread of continuity other than the successive soul states of the poet, Walt Whitman. The various sections of the poem have very little connection, other than the fact that Whitman is the narrator for them all. The sections might be called vignettes of the ideas which flow through the sensitized mind of the poet as he sings for all. Bucke has given us a very helpful summation of "Song of Myself." He says:

In the first place, it is a celebration or glorification of Walt Whitman, of his body, of his mind and soul, with all their functions and attributes . . . in the second place, by implication, it becomes equally a song of exultation, as sung by and for every . . . man or woman, upon the beauty and perfection of his or her body and spirit, the material part being treated as equally divine with the immaterial part, and the immaterial part as equally real and God-like with the material. In a third sense, it is . . . the chant of the whole race considered as one immense and immortal being. From a fourth point of view, it is a . . . glorification of external nature. The way these different senses lie in some passages, one behind the other, and in others are inextricably blended together, defies comment.¹

"Song of Myself" is an excellent example of the symbolic habit of expression so characteristic of Whitman's work published after 1855.

¹R. M. Bucke, Walt Whitman, p. 159.
The writer in a previous chapter has explained the significance of the title, "Song of Myself." Here let us notice some of the various symbols the poet uses in the poem. Besides himself, the poet finds many other people useful as symbols. "The youngster and the red-faced girl,"² "who turn aside up the bushy hill," are but symbolic of the creative instinct. The runaway slave³ becomes the symbol of down-trodden humanity, while grimed blacksmiths⁴ become symbols for constructive power. The negro⁵ who drives the dray symbolizes the sturdy strength of the humblest worker. The unfortunates of society always tugged at Whitman's heart-strings, and he finds symbols for them in the kept-woman, the sponger, the thief, the thick-lipp'd slave, the diseased.⁶ The mothers of the race become symbols of true greatness.⁷ The poet becomes "the clock of time." He can go forward or backward as he wishes to portray heroic deeds. The story of the Alamo captured Whitman's fancy to such an extent that the men of the Alamo⁸ became symbols of undying courage. The faces⁹ of men and women become symbols of God

²"Song of Myself," Section 8, l. 3.
³Ibid., Section 10, l. 15.
⁴Ibid., Section 12, l. 3.
⁵Ibid., Section 13, l. 1.
⁶Ibid., Section 19, ll. 4-5.
⁷Ibid., Section 21, l. 6.
⁸Ibid., Section 34, ll. 1-10.
⁹Ibid., Section 48, l. 17.
to Whitman. The poet gives a kiss to the cotton-field drudge\textsuperscript{10} as a sign that he recognizes the worth of the lowliest. The poet mentions all the gods of antiquity, symbolizing them as "old cautious hucksters."\textsuperscript{11} A man framing a house\textsuperscript{12} becomes a symbol of much greater service to man than were the ancient gods. They served the past, but the man at work serves the present. Firemen\textsuperscript{13} are symbols of valor, and a mother\textsuperscript{14} with nursing babe becomes the symbol for all-including tenderness. Whitman never mentions Christ by name in "Song of Myself," but in one line he pictures himself as walking the ancient Judaean hills with the "beautiful gentle God"\textsuperscript{15} by his side, and the writer takes it that this is his symbol for Christ. While Whitman was not orthodox in his ideas, the tenderness of Christ appealed to him, and he identifies himself with Christ because he, too, suffers with all the broken creatures of earth as symbolized by the hounded slave,\textsuperscript{16} "the old mother, condemn'd for a witch,"\textsuperscript{17} the wounded\textsuperscript{18} persons whose

\textsuperscript{10}Tbid., Section 40, l. 17.
\textsuperscript{11}Tbid., Section 41, l. 7. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{12}Tbid., l. 17.
\textsuperscript{13}Tbid., l. 20; Section 33, l. 139.
\textsuperscript{14}Tbid., Section 41, l. 23.
\textsuperscript{15}Tbid., Section 33, l. 81.
\textsuperscript{16}Tbid., l. 127. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{17}Tbid., l. 126.
\textsuperscript{18}Tbid., ll. 137-138.
injuries cause the poet to turn livid. From this partial list of persons mentioned in "Song of Myself," one sees that Whitman found many valuable symbols in human beings. In recounting a sea-battle of early times, the poet finds the Englishman the symbol for "sturdy pluck," while his grandmother's father, "my captain," becomes the symbol for courage against great odds, as he cries, "We have not struck, we have just begun our part of the fighting."19

Animals furnish symbols for Whitman, even in the highly philosophic "Song of Myself." Animals become the symbols for calm endurance.20 The eyes of oxen21 express more of placid content than many books, while the look of the bay mare22 becomes the symbol for quiet dignity. He says the wild gander,23 guiding his flock, is unimportant to others, but it becomes a symbol of guidance and leadership to the poet. The traits of many animals appear in man, showing his origin from lower forms.24 The whale,25 the ant, the egg of the wren and the tree-toad26 become valuable symbols.

19 Ibid., Section 35, ll. 5, 8, 20.
20 Ibid., Section 32, ll. 1-10.
21 Ibid., Section 13, l. 11.
22 Ibid., l. 20.
23 Ibid., Section 14, ll. 1-4.
24 Ibid., Section 31, l. 9.
25 Ibid., Section 33, l. 33.
26 Ibid., Section 31, ll. 2-3.
A grazing cow\textsuperscript{27} becomes a symbol of bodily symmetry more beautiful than any statue. A mouse,\textsuperscript{28} when its complexities are considered, becomes a symbol of the miraculous sufficient "to stagger sextillions of infidels." Animals are symbols of independence.\textsuperscript{29} Whitman, admiring the beauty, intelligence, and speed of a gigantic stallion, sees it as a symbol of man's evolution; he realizes that man has greatly out-distanced even this noble animal, for he says:

\begin{quote}
I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion, 
Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

The spotted hawk\textsuperscript{31} becomes the symbol for the natural and the unrestrained. The poet says that he, like the hawk, is not tamed. He will sound his poetry, "barbaric yawp," to those who do not understand it, over the roofs of the world. The list of examples cited from nature shows that Whitman found symbols for poetic material in the real world. These visible, natural objects are the instruments through which he expresses the invisible and the intangible.

The poet not only found the world of persons and animals valuable as symbols in "Song of Myself," for the plant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27}Ibid., l. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{28}Ibid., l. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{29}Ibid., Section 32, l. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{30}Ibid., ll. 24-25.
\item \textsuperscript{31}Ibid., Section 52, l. 1.
\end{itemize}
world furnishes him with many symbols highly important. Grass\textsuperscript{32} becomes one of his most valuable symbols. He finds grass, "the handkerchief of the Lord,"\textsuperscript{33} a symbol for God's reality, "growing among black folks as among white,"\textsuperscript{34} thus making grass a symbol of God's impartiality. Grass has multiple meanings in Whitman's mind. It is the "tongue of nature," so to speak. It was the contemplation of a "spear" of summer grass\textsuperscript{35} which set the poetic mind off on its flight in "Song of Myself." Grass stimulates the poetic mind greatly, for he says:

I believe a leaf of grass no less than the journey-work of the stars.\textsuperscript{36}

Thus we see that the poet looks upon a blade of grass as a symbol of God's handiwork ranking with "the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels." Nature furnishes Whitman with the blackberry vine\textsuperscript{37} and the morning-glory\textsuperscript{38} as symbols of beauty.

Men, animal life, and plants are not the only symbols Whitman uses in his effort to set his intangible soul states before our minds. Inanimate objects also become helpful symbols. Powders for invalids\textsuperscript{39} become symbols for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32}Ibid., Section 1, 1. 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{33}Ibid., Section 6, 1. 4. \hfill \textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 1. 10.
  \item \textsuperscript{35}Ibid., Section 1, 1. 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{36}Ibid., Section 31, 1. 1. \hfill \textsuperscript{37}Ibid., 1. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{38}Ibid., Section 24, 1. 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{39}Ibid., Section 20, 1. 8.
\end{itemize}
weakness, while a hat,\textsuperscript{40} worn "indoors or out," becomes a symbol for independent conduct or thinking. In accepting the evolutionary theory, Whitman says that he finds hard rock and coal and long-threaded moss\textsuperscript{41} incorporated in his being. Of course this is not to be taken literally. Rock, coal, and moss become symbols for mental and physical stamina. A grain of sand, seemingly a useless thing, is yet a symbol for the perfection found in nature.\textsuperscript{42} Whitman was avid in his desire for all forms of freedom. He wanted all restraints harmful to man abolished. He saw locks and doors as symbols of restraint, and exclaimed:

Unscrew the locks from the doors!  
Unscrew the doors from their jambs!\textsuperscript{43}

To compile all the symbols used in "Song of Myself" would make a thesis in itself. The illustrations cited show that material symbols, aptly used, are very valuable in the expression of the philosophic and the mystical. De Selincourt, paying tribute to Whitman's powers, says:

Whitman gave America to the world, and so constituted himself a national poet in a new sense... His loudest and most insistent demand was for an art which should have the pride, the fierceness, and the candour of the only emancipated people in the world.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40}\textit{Ibid.}, l. 9. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{41}\textit{Ibid.}, Section 31, l. 8.  
\textsuperscript{42}\textit{Ibid.}, l. 2. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, Section 24, ll. 5-6.  
\textsuperscript{44}Basil De Selincourt, \textit{Walt Whitman}, p. 244.
If Whitman is a national poet, we should use all diligence to expound his symbolism, the main obstacle barring the poet from that large group of readers to which his genius is entitled.

_Leaves of Grass_ contains many short poems wherein ideas are conveyed through symbols. The Civil War furnished Whitman with a great mass of subject matter. "Beat! Beat! Drums!" is a short symbolic war-inspired poem. The beating of drums and the shrill call of bugles have incited men to arms for ages; so Whitman uses the drum and the bugle as appropriate symbols for a poem urging men of all ranks to arms in freedom's cause. "Delicate Cluster" is the name the poet uses for the flag, the symbol of our nation. The clustered stars of the flag are the symbols for the states which compose the union. In another war-born poem, Whitman depicts an aged woman, Ethiopia,\(^45\) the symbol of the enslaved Negro, gazing upon the flag, the symbol of freedom, as "under doughty Sherman" the Union army marched toward the sea. After the war was won, came the assassination of Lincoln, perhaps the greatest tragedy in Whitman's life. To the end of his days he never ceased to mourn the untimely death. He made it a custom to commemorate annually this sad happening. "O Captain! My Captain!" is one of these commemorative poems. It is considered Whitman's best

\(^{45}\)"Ethiopia Saluting the Colors."
poem in formal verse and rhyme. He uses a ship making port after a stormy voyage as a symbol for the Union. The storm, which the ship has passed through safely, is the Civil War, and the "prize won" is the preservation of the Union. But, just as the Ship of State "makes port," that is, wins the war, the "captain" falls dead upon the deck. Thus the captain becomes the symbol for Lincoln, the president. Because Whitman admired Lincoln so greatly, he becomes not only the "captain" of the Ship of State, but is also called "dear father," a fitting symbol for a beloved leader. The merrily ringing bells, symbols for the victory won, later became tolling funeral bells, symbols of public mourning. The symbolism of the poem is easily grasped, making this the most popular poem in Leaves of Grass.

Whitman, while feeling that the victory of the North over the South was "the victory of liberty over the feudal past," had no animosity towards the South. He knew neither friend nor foe in his work in army hospitals. His loving care served all alike, and we must remember that it was an infection contracted in his efforts to serve the sick and wounded which caused the illness that made him a semi-invalid in his prime. "Reconciliation" reflects the poet's sorrow over war's carnage. Gazing on the coffin's face of

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46 Edgar Lee Masters, Walt Whitman, p. 130.
a fallen enemy, a symbol for war's hapless victims, the poet reverently places a kiss upon the brow of the dead. The kiss is a symbol of reconciliation. The presence of death has removed all rancor from the poet's mind, and he sees only that "a man divine as myself is dead," hence the forgiving kiss.

While Whitman's religious sentiments as expressed in *Leaves of Grass* tend largely to the unorthodox, the strictest stickler for orthodoxy may read the "Prayer of Columbus" with pleasure. *Columbus*\(^{47}\) was a stimulating symbol of bravery and achievement to Whitman. The poet pictures the aged Admiral "far, far from home," struggling against death on a "savage shore," the shore being a symbol for life. He makes his way to "the island's edge," the seashore, a symbol for departure from life, to the unknown seas of death. The weary wanderer says he can not rest until he commends himself to God in prayer. He feels that God has guided him on all his voyages. The poet sees these voyages as the means of the union of "Europe's cloy'd lands" with the fresh fields of the new world. He says he knows the "brutish measureless undergrowth," a symbol for the often vicious immigrants who come from the "elder lands" to the new world. He hopes the swords they bear to the new world may be beaten into plowshares, the symbol for peace and prosperity. He

\(^{47}\)See also "A Thought of Columbus" and "Passage to India," Section 6, ll. 28-43.
hopes the "lifeless cross," a symbol for the stagnating religions of the old world, may "bud and blossom" in the new world. Even while the great Admiral thanks God for his guidance, clouds, symbols of death, are closing in on him. He says, "Let the old timbers part," that is, let his body disintegrate, but his soul will "cling fast to God," though "waves," symbols for the vicissitudes of life, buffet him to the end. Whitman saw many parallels between his life and that of Columbus. Just as Columbus had dared the unknown seas of the world, Whitman had dared the unknown seas of mystical poetry. Therefore, Columbus was an ever-stimulating symbol for Whitman.

"Chanting the Square Deific" is the title for a religious poem derived from four symbols which complete the poet's "square," or symbol for God. Whitman's flair for the unconventional gave him the opportunity to add a new symbol to the emblems which have been used in the past to denote God. A circle was an early symbol for God because no one knows where it begins or ends. Later on, the triangle expressed man's idea of God, or the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Whitman added a fourth line to the triangle and the "square deific" became another symbol of divinity. Whitman did not form his square with the orthodox trinity plus another member. He uses Jehovah, or natural law, as one side of the square. Christ became the second
side, while Satan, or man's will as opposed to God's will, and "Santa Spirita," become, respectively, the third and the fourth sides of the "square deific." The conventional churchgoer may not agree with Whitman's theology, but he must agree that the poet effectively employs the four symbols which form the "square deific."

While Whitman has written many poems about death, the new reader must not conclude that his emotions are always sadly solemn. He was a man of most cheerful temperament, and he has written many poems characterized by a sense of happy and hearty well-being. "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" is a buoyant poem wherein the poet expresses his belief that the sturdy pioneers, symbols of the future greatness of America, will build, in their westward trend, a true democracy, unhampered by European traditions.

A most valuable implement for the pioneer was the axe, and Whitman, knowing this, has given us a most interesting symbolic poem entitled "Song of the Broad-Axe." It is a fitting yoke-fellow for his song in praise of the dauntless pioneers. The opening lines are remarkable examples of weird melody and symbolic usage:

Weapon shapely, naked, wan!
Head from the mother's bowels drawn,
Wooded flesh and metal bone, limb only one, and
lip only one,
Gray-blue leaf by red-heat grown, helve produced from a little seed sown
Resting the grass amid and upon,
To be lean'd and to lean on. 48

This is indeed an excellent description of the broad-axe,
with its oaken handle and blue steel blade produced from
iron ore refined by red-white flames. The unused axe rests
on the ground, or is leaned against some object, but when
needed, it is indeed an implement "to lean on," to depend
upon. The axe is the symbol around which the thought of
the poem is developed and the symbolism is readily under-
stood. After the rather conventional but very effective
opening stanza of rhymed poetry, the poet changes to an
unrhymed prose chant and hints that he is to sing of
"strong shapes," 49 symbols of the new civilization the
pioneers will develop with the axe. The pioneers, sturdily
swinging the axe, make material progress possible. As sym-
 bols characteristic of the pioneer, the poet names the axe,
the rifle, and the saddle bag. 50 The "clear untrimm'd
faces" 51 of the woodsmen become symbols of the manly bear-
ing which characterized the men of the frontier. The sym-
 bols the poet uses to show the progress of civilization are
legion. Among them are the lumbermen 52 felling the forests
of the north, the butcher 53 in his slaughter-house, the house-

48 "Song of the Broad-Axe," Section 1, ll. 1-6.
49 Ibid., l. 7.
50 Ibid., Section 3, l. 11.
51 Ibid., l. 13.
52 Ibid., l. 17.
53 Ibid., l. 18.
builder,\textsuperscript{54} the mason,\textsuperscript{55} the spar-makers,\textsuperscript{56} the fireman,\textsuperscript{57} the forger\textsuperscript{58} at his furnace, and "the makers of the axe, large and small."\textsuperscript{59} Completing the third section of the "Song of the Broad-Axe," the poet makes a long list of people who, in the past, have found the axe a symbol for their achievements: primal mechanics and engineers, Roman lictors, and "the antique European warrior."\textsuperscript{60} He notes that the uplifted arm\textsuperscript{61} and the limply tumbling body\textsuperscript{62} of the slain foe as symbols of the axe's use in man's age-long efforts to gain liberty are significant. From earliest times the axe,\textsuperscript{63} battering at castle gates, at temple doors, at walls of houses, has been the symbol of war, pillage, and persecution. The poet warns that muscle,\textsuperscript{64} the symbol for the power that swings the axe, can achieve only material things. He insists that powerful personalities\textsuperscript{65} are far greater than purely material achievements. A strong being\textsuperscript{66} is "the proof of the race"; thus the poet makes the person of

\begin{align*}
\textsuperscript{54} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 21. \\
\textsuperscript{55} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 34. \\
\textsuperscript{56} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 38. \\
\textsuperscript{57} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 44. \\
\textsuperscript{58} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 50. \\
\textsuperscript{59} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 51. \\
\textsuperscript{60} & \text{Ibid.}, ll. 55, 57, 58. \\
\textsuperscript{61} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 59. \\
\textsuperscript{62} & \text{Ibid.}, l. 60. \\
\textsuperscript{63} & \text{Ibid.}, ll. 58-70. \\
\textsuperscript{64} & \text{Ibid.}, Section 4, l. 1. \\
\textsuperscript{65} & \text{Ibid.}, ll. 15-16. \\
\textsuperscript{66} & \text{Ibid.}, Section 6, ll. 4-7.
\end{align*}
fine traits a symbol for mankind to emulate. The poet
welcomes material gains, but he warns that the material may
dwarf the spiritual, so he asks, "What is your money-making
now?" Money thus becomes a symbol for the material. The
poet sees that "a sterile landscape may obscure the ore"; that is,
a forbidding exterior may conceal fine traits of
color, thus making the landscape a symbol for man's
body, while the ore becomes the symbol for personality.
The section concludes with the idea that in all ages men of
courage and ability have arisen to fulfill the tasks of
their times. The poet says "the mine and the miners" are here.
In other words, the mine is the symbol for the
world, and the miners symbols for those who nobly serve
their age. The huge and bloody European headsman, armed
with his ponderous axe, becomes the symbol for despotic
power. The poet rejoices that in his own land the axe is
washed clean of blood, and the scaffold, the symbol for
death, is untrodden. The axe in America is used for con-
structive purposes only, and civilization progresses as the
axe "leaps" into action. Just as the axe is a symbol of ma-
terial progress, the poet lists many other tools as em-
blematic of progress. Before the poet's eyes appear various

67 Ibid., 1. 9.  
68 Ibid., Section 7, 1. 1.  
69 Ibid., 11. 2-5.  
70 Ibid., Section 8, 11. 1-5.  
71 Ibid., Section 9. 11. 7-11.
"shapes"; 72 factories, arsenals, foundries, markets, railroads, and ship-yards. 73 All these are symbols of the material forces needed to make our civilization great. Whitman never glosses over the fact that evil may exist along with good. Among the evil shapes which he sees are the prisoner at the bar, 74 old and young drunkards, 75 the adulterous, unwholesome couple, 76 the gambling-board, 77 the murderer, 78 and the hangman's dangling rope. 79 All these symbolize some manifestation of evil in the world. Finally, the poet beholds arising the great democracy of the future, the symbol for the mighty America he pictures in his mind's eye as the ideal state, the pattern for the rest of the world. This ideal democracy will not be perfect; she will recognize evil, for nothing is concealed from her, 80 but because she is spiritually strong, she will move unsullied among "the gross and soil'd." 81 Whitman does not visualize the ideal state as imminent. It will be the result of centuries. 82

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72Ibid., 1. 24. 73Ibid., 11. 25-28.
74Ibid., Section 10, 1. 11. 75Ibid., 1. 12.
76Ibid., 1. 14. 77Ibid., 1. 15.
78Ibid., 1. 16. 79Ibid., 1. 17.
80Ibid., Section 11, 1. 4. 81Ibid., 1. 3.
82Ibid., Section 12, 1. 2.
The many symbols used in "Song of the Broad-Axe" show how helpful the concrete may be in aiding the poet to express abstractions. Perhaps this poem is typical of Whitman's poetic efforts. Masters says of him:

He felled to some extent the encumbering forests and let later eyes see in part what the lay of the land was, what its resources were under the hills, and what its fertility on top. That had to be done in order that later poets could build beautiful cities of song . . . harmonious with the American landscape. 83

We have seen that the pioneers, wielding their axes, were sources of inspiration for Whitman. The roads of the world also fired his poetic fancy, and "Song of the Open Road" gives us another highly symbolic and buoyant song of life lived freely and wholesomely. The poet sees life stretching out as "a long brown path," "the open road." 84 A long winding road is an excellent symbol for life, with its ups and downs. Whitman rebelled at the constraints of indoor life, and revelled in the largeness and freedom of the outside world; so an open road, basking in the sun and the air he loved, becomes one of his most inspiring symbols. He complains of libraries 85 as symbols of cramping restraint as contrasted with the freedom of the open road. He never asked that man's life be spent upon the constellations, 86 symbols for the ideal. He found the earth 87 a

83 Masters, op. cit., p. 327.
84 "Song of the Open Road," Section 1, l. 1.
85 Ibid., l. 6. 86 Ibid., l. 9. 87 Ibid., l. 8.
symbol of sufficiency for man's journey through life. As the poet travels the highway he assumes "the old delicious burdens"\(^{88}\) of the race, "burdens" being poetic symbols for the problems of humanity. The air\(^{89}\) of the open road was a symbol of the inspiration which motivated the poet. All classes of people are found on life's highway, and the poet is friend to one and all. Whitman in this poem gives full credit to the inanimate objects\(^{90}\) which have helped him express his ideas. All the paths of the world become symbols of achievement or adventure to the poet. He views the paths\(^{91}\) which branch from the main roadside and the "flagg'd walks"\(^{92}\) of cities. Each has its particular significance. The public road\(^{93}\) becomes a symbol of the greatest value, for the poet says it expresses him better even than he can express himself. All the paths of the earth are the poet's. He says he will toss "a new gladness and roughness" along the ways he travels. His messages will not be poetic maunderings. The truths of the soul will be learned through "the empower'd gates,"\(^{94}\) symbols of the ever-questioning mind.

\(^{88}\)Ibid., l. 12.  
\(^{89}\)Ibid., Section 3, l. 1.  
\(^{90}\)Ibid., l. 2.  
\(^{91}\)Ibid., l. 4.  
\(^{92}\)Ibid., l. 6.  
\(^{93}\)Ibid., Section 4, ll. 8-9.  
\(^{94}\)Ibid., Section 7, l. 2.
He who travels with the poet must not stop long in havens where there are "sweet, laid-up stores," symbols for a life of ease. He must pursue the more adventurous ways of life, though they lead over "pathless and wild seas," symbols for the untried, the daring, the new. The poet insists that all abandon the outworn theories of "bat-eyed and materialistic priests," who are symbols of blind spiritual leadership. As man advances on life's highway, all that hinders progress must be discarded. What more fitting symbol for the outmoded, the useless can be found than "the stale cadaver," which the poet says blocks up the passage and must be removed? Life's journey on the open road requires stamina, of which "the best blood and thews" are excellent symbols. The poet does not offer "the old smooth prizes," symbols for ease and comfort, but offers "rough new prizes," symbols of effort and struggle to those who brave the open road under his guidance. On the highway the poet expects to follow in the footsteps of "the great Companions," his symbols for the men and women of the past who have promoted progress. The traveler who

95 Ibid., Section 9, l. 8.  96 Ibid., Section 10, l. 2.
97 Ibid., l. 7.  98 Ibid., l. 8.
99 Ibid., l. 10.  100 Ibid., Section 11, l. 2.
101 Ibid., Section 12, l. 1.
benefits by the experiences of life will learn to garner
the good from life as symbolized by "the best of the
farmer's farm," "the rich man's villa," "the fruits of
orchards, the flowers of gardens."\(^\text{102}\) Finally, the poet
thinks the traveler will learn to look upon the universe
itself\(^\text{103}\) "as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling
souls." Thus the universe becomes a symbol for all the
paths which lead man to his goal. The poet sees evil on
life's journey, and will expose it, if it be wickedness of
heart, typified by "death under the breast-bones," or an
evil spirit, symbolized by "death under the skull-bones."\(^\text{104}\)
The poet knows his call is the call to battle, but he of-
fers his hand,\(^\text{105}\) here a symbol for his poems, to guide
men as they struggle along life's road. He thinks his ad-
vice and love more valuable than "preaching or law," if the
traveler will but accept them.

Binns says the open road is a symbol of Freedom, Ac-
ceptance, Sanity, Comradeship, Immortality, and Eternal
battles.\(^\text{106}\) All must admit that "Song of the Open Road" is
a challenge to live life freely and courageously.

As contrasted with the poems of courage and achieve-
ment just analyzed, Whitman has written many poems which

\(^\text{102}\) Ibid., Section 13, l. 10.  \(^\text{103}\) Ibid., l. 15.
\(^\text{104}\) Ibid., l. 37.  \(^\text{105}\) Ibid., Section 15, l. 7.
\(^\text{106}\) H. B. Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman, p. 119.
deal with death and the immortality of the soul. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is one of the most popular of these symbolic poems. It is a death-inspired poem with many delightful lyrics and descriptive lines. While the poem is much shorter, Binns thinks it may be favorably compared with Whitman's other great chant of death, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The dominant symbols for the poem are the female mocking-bird, the symbol for physical love; her mate, the symbol for spiritual love; and the sea, the "cradle endlessly rocking." When his mate was present, under the influence of physical love, the bird's song was only mediocre; but after her death, under the influence of spiritual love, he sang his most beautiful songs.

Is it pushing the analogy too far to say that the unhatched eggs in the nest became symbols of the poet's unuttered songs? The poet says the bird's song, heard in early childhood, aroused in his heart the desire to sing his own thoughts or poems for mankind. Whitman delightfully combines the symbols of singing bird and sighing sea to produce one of his most beautiful poems. The sea gives back the answer to the bird's cry for the return of his mate that death alone holds the answer to life's riddles.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is another symbolic poem developed around definite, helpful, and

107 Ibid., p. 159.
artistic symbols. The writer has explained in a previous chapter the symbolic value of the lilac flower in the elegy written in memory of Lincoln. Perhaps as the poet pondered the sad news in the lilac-scented twilight, afar off he saw a dark cloud obscure a setting star, while a bird sang plaintively in the distance. The poetic mind grasped the possibilities of flower, bird, star, and cloud. From these symbols the poet evolved the Lincoln memorial poem, described by Swinburne as the "most sonorous nocturne ever chanted."\textsuperscript{108} The lilac flower\textsuperscript{109} becomes the symbol for the poet's love or veneration for the dead Lincoln, while the singing bird\textsuperscript{110} is the symbol for the poet's gift of song. The setting star\textsuperscript{111} is a fine symbol for the lost leader, while the "black mark,"\textsuperscript{112} or the cloud, that obscures the star, is a most excellent symbol for death, which blots man from life. The symbolism is both beautiful and obvious. Had Whitman been as successful with all his symbolism, there would be very little need to explain it. The poem is not the voicing of a private, personal grief. It is rather a solemn, national lament for the "powerful western fallen star," the martyred president. The poet entwines three of his most artistic symbols in the closing

\textsuperscript{108}Emory Holloway, \textit{Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative}, p. 228.
\textsuperscript{109}"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", Section 1, 1, 1.
\textsuperscript{110}\textit{Tbid.}, Section 4, 1, 2.
\textsuperscript{111}\textit{Tbid.}, Section 2, 1, 1.
\textsuperscript{112}\textit{Tbid.}, 1, 3.
lines of the poem. He says that he sings for the "sweetest, wisest soul" that he has ever known through the medium of "lilac and star and bird."\textsuperscript{113}

"Passage to India" is, according to many, Whitman's profoundest symbolic poem. Many of its lines are examples of exquisite melody, voicing the highest sentiments. It contains many examples of striking symbolism. The symbolism contained in the title has been explained elsewhere in the discussion. The highly mystical thought of the poem is developed from three very material symbols: the Suez Canal,\textsuperscript{114} our first continental railroad,\textsuperscript{115} and the Atlantic cable.\textsuperscript{116} These three historic events inspired the poet to think that the physical world had been drawn into a more perfect "rondure,"\textsuperscript{117} or roundness, a symbol for wholeness and unity. He hopes this closer relationship "is not for trade and transportation only,"\textsuperscript{118} but will unite the minds of men, in order that the soul may come to its real flowering. After the poet is well launched upon his theme, he abandons the three symbols that set his mind to working, and the title "Passage to India" becomes really more important symbolically than the original excitative

\textsuperscript{113}Ibid., Section 16, l. 21.
\textsuperscript{114}"Passage to India," Section 1, l. 5.
\textsuperscript{115}Ibid., l. 6.
\textsuperscript{116}Ibid., l. 7.
\textsuperscript{117}Ibid., Section 4, l. 12.
\textsuperscript{118}Ibid., Section 2, l. 24.
symbols. Comparisons from the symbolic qualities of the title furnish much of the inspirational quality of the poem, after the third section is finished. The thread of continuity between the sections is drawn thin. The main idea is that the soul of man may finally span the chasm between it and the universal soul, after the human race has been reborn through the union of the materialistic West with the mystical East.

Carpenter remarks that the short sections of the poem are as "readily intelligible" as poems can be that express their meaning through symbols alone, or use symbols for the purpose of creating an effective mood.\textsuperscript{119} He further adds that it is remarkable that around the three very material symbols the poet should have evolved poetry which deals almost entirely "with the larger aspirations of the soul." He notices that the symbolisms employed are those of "a ship or of a bird questing on strong pinions."\textsuperscript{120}

Besides the excitatory symbols and the inspirational powers of the title, Whitman uses many other concrete symbols in developing "Passage to India." Among his valuable symbols are Columbus,\textsuperscript{121} Adam and Eve,\textsuperscript{122} all the great captains, engineers, scientists, and inventors\textsuperscript{123} who have

\textsuperscript{119}George R. Carpenter, \textit{Walt Whitman}, p. 120. \textsuperscript{120}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{121}"Passage to India," Section 3, ll. 25-27; Section 6, ll. 31-43.

\textsuperscript{122}\textit{Ibid.}, Section 5, l. 9. \textsuperscript{123}\textit{Ibid.}, ll. 22-23.
achieved in the past for the advancement of the race.

Finally the poet envisions as a reality of the future the true poet,\textsuperscript{124} who will reconcile God and man. Whitman clings to the idea that the poet has a great mission to perform. He says the great poet will "pass the straits and conquer the mountains," making them symbols for difficulties the poet will solve, while "rounding the cape" becomes a symbol for future good. The poet, the true son of God, "shall double the cape of Good Hope to some purpose," and then,

\begin{quote}
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and disfused no more,  
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

When the poet has accomplished his true function, the soul will be able to take off on spiritual flights much more momentous than any material passage to India. It will take off "to more than India," to the realms of eternity. While the soul is trying for this "more than India," it will learn of itself. It will view the shores of time "strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons," indeed excellent symbols for those of the past who have died in vain trying to solve "the fierce enigmas" and "strangling problems" of the soul. After the soul has solved its problems, it will then take off on its final flight to God. The poet pictures the complete

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{124}\textit{Ibid.}, ll. 24-25.  
\textsuperscript{125}\textit{Ibid.}, ll. 34-35.
\end{footnotesize}
unity finally existing between man and God. He uses the term, "the Elder Brother," as a symbol for God, while man's symbol is that of "the Younger" [brother]. When "all the seas," time and space, have been crossed, "the capes weathered," all interferences surmounted, the "Younger" brother will be joyfully clasped in the embrace of the "Elder Brother." This last embrace is a symbol for the union of the creature, man, with the Creator. The poet asks, in the last section, if man's soul is plumed for its final flight to God. If the soul is ready to make the attempt, he says,

Cut the hawcers -- haul out -- shake out every sail! Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough? These lines are highly symbolic. A ship with severed hawser and all sails set is an excellent symbol for flight, for departure, while trees, solidly rooted, are symbols of immobility. When the soul, symbolized by the ship, is all set for the final passage "to more than India," to God, the poet wishes that it may

Sail forth -- steer for the deep waters only, Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me.

\[126\textbf{Ibid.}, \textit{Section 8, l. 46.} \quad 127\textbf{Ibid.}, \textit{l. 49.}\]
\[128\textbf{Ibid.}, \textit{l. 46.} \quad 129\textbf{Ibid.}\]
\[130\textbf{Ibid.}, \textit{Section 9, ll. 21-22.}\]
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go, 
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all. 

O my brave soul! 
O farther farther sail! 
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God? 
O farther, farther, farther sail! 131

A ship as the symbol for the soul was always satisfying to Whitman. He is absolutely sure that when his soul sets off on its last voyage it will somewhere enter the ports of God.

The numerous examples of symbolism cited from the different sections of Leaves of Grass should prove that Whitman became a consistent and often brilliant exponent of symbolism as a means of presenting the intangible ideas expounded in Leaves of Grass.

131 Ibid., 11. 25-32.
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